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Tales From the House of the Moon

by

Resmiranda

Prelude:
The Maiden and the Lord of the West

Kagome settled back in her chair in the lecture hall, her foot twitching impatiently as she waited for the beginning of her class. She was a senior now in college with her Archaeology degree nearly squared away, except for this particular requirement: Myths and Legends of Japan. She'd saved it for the end of her college career for a reason ; it was almost a treat, something to reward herself for making it through.

So far, though, it had been rather boring. Secretly, Kagome had been wishing to hear of any news of Inuyasha in whatever dusty tomes her professor could dig up, but so far it seemed that she and her friends – she repressed the familiar, painful hitch in her chest – had passed out of the pages of history, and even out of imagination. All that remained of them was her own memory and the broken well, hidden in the darkness of her shrine home.

However, today might hold some more clues to Inuyasha's family at the very least. During the last class period, she had been immensely excited, barely able to hold still, for they had discussed the legend of Inutaisho and Ryuukotsusei, and as far as she could tell it was fairly accurate. Tenaeda-sensei had told the story of how the Demon Lord of the West had fallen in love and taken a human wife, but since such a thing was weakness, he had been challenged by his vassals to test his strength. The taiyoukai battled a dragon of lightning in order to secure his lands and rule, but the dragon had administered a fatal blow and Inutaisho had only been able to seal it into the mountain. If it hadn't hit her so close to home, Kagome would have thought such a tale to be terribly

romantic, but she knew the rest of the story – how the Lord's wife had a child who suffered for his father's death, and how his father's choice drove a wedge between his sons – and she was saddened by it instead.

Her mouth twisted ruefully. Perhaps today's story wouldn't be quite so depressing. This morning, they were going to read a lesser known fable about Inutaisho; one that promised to reveal why the powerful demon felt such compassion for mankind, rather than the disdain commonly felt by the rest of his race. While it wasn't anything about Inuyasha, it was still something, and these days, five years after she had last seen him, almost anything that hinted at him seemed like some kind of connection, something that joined them across the echoing chasm of time. With effort, Kagome stilled her twitching foot, and glanced down at her notebook, ready to take down anything and everything that seemed important. Tenaeda-sensei was an excellent story-teller, and sometimes it was difficult to pick out the important aspects of his stories.

Around her, students grew quiet as the professor wandered in, beaming at them all with bright white teeth and round cheeks. Kagome smiled back, his cheer warming her a little, loosening the ropes of anxiety that bound her heart these days. She realized that she was chewing on her pen and quickly took it out of her mouth, readying herself.

Tenaeda-sensei cleared his throat, and the class sat up straighter, eager to begin. Their professor smiled, and began the lesson.

"Today," he announced, "we will study the legend of the Maiden and the Lord of the West." He made a great show of readjusting his tie, and cracking his knuckles, which just made the class squirm in their seats; everyone liked a good story, and Tenaeda-sensei only delayed when the story was particularly good. Kagome almost bit through her lip.

Finally, ministrations finished, he cleared his throat again, rearranged his notes, and began.

"Long ago, the Youkai Lord of the West was a cold, hard man, who cared little for other demons and less for humans. He was known all across Japan as a ruthless ruler with an iron grip on his lands, and whomever crossed his path, he killed without compassion or mercy or distinction for friend or foe. He had

no allies, and no companions."

Sounds like another annoying dog demon I used to know, Kagome thought wryly. How long has it been since I thought of him? She dutifully jotted down a few notes.

"The Lord was powerful in the days of his youth, but he was not invincible and had many battles in which he was injured. After one such skirmish, he was greatly injured, and was left to die on the floor of the forest, unable to move. Now in the Lands of the West, the Country of the Moon, there was a small village, and in that village there lived a small human girl. When she was very young she was orphaned, and she had lived in the hovel of her parents, all alone, until the day she found the Lord of the West beneath a tree.

"She was compassionate and gentle, and cared for the lord until he was able to move again, although it is said that he was ungrateful and refused to thank her, but she did not mind, such was her spirit and kindness.

"Unfortunately for her, shortly after the lord regained his strength, her village was attacked by wolves, and she was killed with one bite, although her body was not devoured for she was but a poor orphan and half-starved at that.

"The Lord of the West may never have known of her fate if he had not caught the scent of her blood on the wind, and returned to find her broken corpse, bereft of life.

"Normally, he would have left her there to be consumed by the birds and return to the earth, but something happened to him as he stared at her lifeless form; he found himself remembering her kindness and compassion, her selfless generosity, and he was touched to the depths of his iron soul. The ruthless Western Lord was moved by her tragedy, and so he summoned his power and courage and opened the gate between the worlds with his sword, descending into hell to find her soul and return it to her body.

"And because he had such compassion for her, he was allowed to pass unharmed between the worlds, and she was restored. From that day forward they traveled together: the Inu-Youkai Prince and the peasant girl."

Kagome's pen stopped moving. Something about this story was hauntingly

familiar, made her feel as though someone had opened up the back of her head and poured ice water down the inside of her spine. This is not the story of Inuyasha's father... she thought dimly, and her eyes unfocused so that the classroom, like the past, was obscured. Flashes of memory streaked across her mind, and she was momentarily filled with visions of wolves, and a little girl with a face as bright as the sun, and demon kings, and a sword that could not kill...

"They stayed together for a long while, and as she traveled with him, the Lord of the Moonlit Lands was faced with his first great trial. One night, the girl was stolen by the wind and carried to the lair of an evil hanyou who only wished for power, and when the demon prince gave chase he was nearly killed and consumed by the hanyou, who wanted the power of a full youkai. After many long battles, the hanyou was finally defeated, and the Lord returned to his family home in the West: the House of the Moon.

"The girl grew into a young woman, and stayed with her lord in the House of the Moon. Because she never left his side, and he could not deny her what she wanted, she grew up wild and barefoot, listening to the trees and rivers, speaking with the spirits of the land and sky, and she was happy. For his part, the lord found himself content to watch her in the fields as she grew into a lovely maiden with hair like coal and eyes like honey, long-limbed and moon-pale. She was afraid of nothing but wolves, for she still remembered the death-blow that had dragged her soul from her body, and she loved nothing more than her lord, who kept the wolves away and brought her back from the lands of the dead.

"But all was not well in the lands of the West. There was talk that the lord was growing weak and foolish, that he was addled in the head from caring for a human woman. Restless tongues wagged and waved, spreading lies, telling of how the lord meant to take her as his wife, how he would bring low his dynasty, and how the West would fall with him. The youkai who payed homage to him grew discontent and restless, and finally, when the prince was away in the North, attending to business, his vassals lay siege to the House of the Moon.

"Not a building was left standing; the lord's faithless vassals burned it to the ground and slaughtered his household, soaking the grounds of the gardens with blood and mutilating the bodies. When they found the human maiden

that loved her lord and refused to leave his dwelling, they ravished her one by one, and then sliced her body to pieces and buried them, scattered across the land, so that not even the Great Demon of the Western Lands could find her soul and bring her back again, no matter how deep his compassion, or how strong his love.

"When the lord finally returned to find his home in ruins and his rule at an end, he went mad with grief, and challenged the youkai who had ascended to his position, accusing them all of trickery and deceit and dishonor. The youkai agreed, but at dawn the next day, when the duel for the throne of the land was to take place, the prince was ambushed. His attackers broke the sword he used in battle, shattered it into a thousand pieces, but try as they might, the sword that opened the gateway between the worlds could not be broken. Instead it was given to the reigning lord, and the disgraced prince was sealed with magical chains that could not be broken, forged in the inferno of the heart of the world, and thrown into the sea.

"But the lord was strong, and did not die. Instead he broke the chains that were never meant to be broken and was carried on the breast of the waters to the lands of the South.

"Like his sword, his heart was shattered. The exiled prince made his way far to the East, divested himself of his kingly garb and cut his hair. For five and twenty years, and five and twenty years again he wandered, clothed as a peasant, dishonored and in disgrace, and even though he traversed the Eastern Lands, the Country of the Sun, he lingered in shadows, searching for his lost child and calling to her, calling out her beautiful name.

"It came to pass that a miko became prominent in the North, and she was of such great power and such great compassion that even youkai who sought an end to sorrows went to her and asked her for assistance. When the lord heard of her, he immediately traveled to the North, and sought her out and asked her to take away his memories of his child, so that he could overcome his grief and avenge his own dishonor, and her terrible demise. The weight of sorrow on his heart was so great that he had no will to fight, and no means to restore himself.

"But the miko shook her head.

"'You would forget her?' she asked kindly, but not without sorrow.

"'Yes,' he replied. 'I cannot fight, and I cannot bring justice for her.'

"'But to forget her would be to take away your justice,' the miko replied. 'You must work through your sorrows on your own before justice can be served.'

"And the lord despaired, for in fifty years, his grief had not lessened. He took his leave of the miko, but for three nights afterward, he returned, and asked her again to peel away the memories.

"Finally, on the third night, the miko relented. 'I can help you,' she said, 'but I will not take away the memories.' She stood and retreated into her shrine, and returned with thick clothing so black that it faded into the night, and the prince had to concentrate to see it.

"'Take these, and remember her,' the miko told him. 'You must soak these garments with your tears before the weight will be lifted, and then your justice will be served.'

"The prince was surprised, for not once in his fifty years of wandering – indeed, in his entire life – had he shed a tear for anyone. But he took the clothes anyway and went into the forest and sat beneath a cherry tree, and remembered when he first met his child, how her compassion for one such as he had touched his heart in a way no one ever had, and how she laughed at fireflies, and cried out when she heard wolves, and smiled when he looked at her.

"And he remembered how much he missed her, and the lord buried his face in the cloth, and wept.

"When the dawn came, the lord looked at the clothing in front of him and found that his tears had turned them pure white; but far more amazing was the lifting of the weight on his soul, and no longer was the exiled Prince of the Moonlit Lands bound by sorrow and sealed by grief. He donned the clothes that had turned the color of the moon, and gathered his power to him.

"Within a fortnight, the prince had called on old alliances, found new friends, and sent his spies deep into his ancestral lands, and when the full moon

reached its zenith and hung in the sky like a tear, he swept across the Moonlit Country and reclaimed what was his, slaughtering the coalition of vassals that had overthrown him, but merely scattering their households to the wind, for they were blameless, and he remembered his child clearly, and knew she would have hated the destruction of innocents. Those who had not stood against him were welcomed back to his fold, and slowly the lord rebuilt his kingdom, and once again resided in the House of the Moon.

"When a year had passed, the Western Lord, restored and strong, built a shrine to his lost child, and around it planted flowers to attract butterflies by day, and fireflies by night, to make her smile in the world beyond.

"And a century to the day when the Prince had first brought her soul back from the dead, the grave keeper made his way to the shrine; and there he found the carcasses of a hundred and one wolves laid at its foot, the final token of affection from the Lord of the West to his child, whom he had loved, and lost, and then found again."

All around, the hiss and rush of breath was suddenly stilled, and then let out in one great whoosh, and chairs clattered as people rose to leave.

But Kagome was glued to her seat, staring at her notebook, and her eyes were filled with tears, blurring the pages in front of her where she had drawn dozens upon dozens of waning moons.

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Chapter One

"There is an hour wherein a man might be happy all his life, could he but find it." – George Herbert

* * *

Sesshoumaru, the Prince of the Western Lands, King of the Moonlit Country, and Lord of the House of the Moon, quietly wondered why he was standing in the chill air and staring at the western wall of his house so early in the morning that it might as well still be yesterday.

Beside him, Rin was looking mildly disappointed. "Don't you see anything, Sesshoumaru-sama?" she asked him, earnestly. She was shivering slightly even though her kimono was thick and layered, but she seemed alert and determined to show him... whatever it was. He cocked his head to the side, as if to shake the vision into something different, but only succeeded in crossing his eyes.

He heard Rin sigh impatiently as he gave in to an enormous, tongue-curling yawn. Not for the first time Sesshoumaru felt mildly regretful that the one human being he'd picked to save was the only human in the world who rose so early that going to bed was just an excuse to change her hairstyle.

Perhaps, Sesshoumaru thought as he let his mind wander off course a little further, she needs all night to fix her hair. That might be it. It did seem that it would take an hour or two for her hair to be coaxed into its daily confections, so this hypothesis had a strange appeal. This particular morning Rin wore her hair in a strangely elaborate coiffure, full of intricate loops and glossy locks and skewered through with enormous hair pins that would probably put someone’s eye out sooner or later – maybe even her own, if she turned her head too quickly. There was a time when she never thought about such things at all; she wore her little yukata and her hair was pulled to the side in a simple style, and she was content to walk with him through the forests of his lands as he tracked his enemies and made short work of them. And then she grew right before his eyes, so quickly that one day as she was bending over to inspect a particularly interesting species of caterpillar the yukata almost burst at the seams, and only quick thinking on his part had saved her modesty, although it cost him his haori and a measure of dignity.

And now she had an excess of heavy winter kimonos and light summer yukatas and she seemed to want to change them every other week, a habit which left him mildly perplexed. He had come home one evening to find all of Rin's clothes in a heap outside her window and a number of terrified servants

running through the house, picking up stray obis and kimonos and returning them to her room where she would promptly throw them out the window again in a seemingly unending cycle. Sesshoumaru feared that she had taken ill – the little display could only be a result of fever – until he presented the problem to Myouga as the old retainer was passing through, and the flea had assured him that it was perfectly natural for young girls to obsess over what they wore and to toss perfectly good clothes out the window in fits of pique because the colors had faded slightly.

"One might call it a fever," Myouga had said as sagely as he could, "except that it lasts for several years after the first blood."

Sesshoumaru had arched a brow. In his experience, when a woman reached maturity it merely meant she found a mate, not that she went insane.

"It happens to those of human heritage who have not mated," Myouga said. "Milord's brother was rather susceptible to it as well."

"Are you saying Inuyasha is a female?" Sesshoumaru had asked. Myouga's information sounded rather sketchy to him.

Myouga vigorously shook his head. "He is part human. After he reached maturity he became wild and rebellious, ne?"

Sesshoumaru had snorted. "He was always wild and rebellious. And lacking in sense."

"Well, do you remember Kagome-sama?"

There was a pause. Sesshoumaru had met many people over the years, many of whom soon joined the ranks of the dead, but he could not recall anyone with the name Kagome. "Who?" he had finally asked.

"The miko with whom Inuyasha-sama used to travel."

Sesshoumaru digested this information. "Was that her name?" Truly, the world was filled with wonders.

"Hai. If you recall, she was quite rebellious as well, and had very little sense. I

remember she jumped into quite a few battles without thinking first."

"That is not quite the same thing as tossing clothes out a window," Sesshoumaru had replied.

"Ah," Myouga said, "but it was quite foolhardy and senseless, nonetheless. Even more so than purposeful defenestration of one's own wardrobe."

Sesshoumaru had been forced to admit that this was true, and reluctantly accepted the fact that Rin was not the little girl he used to know, but was instead growing into a human woman. The thought tweaked his heart, just a little. Resolutely, he ignored the feeling and ordered more clothes for her and trod on Jaken to make himself feel better.

Unfortunately she hadn't stopped her strange changes. She was volatile now, but she still seemed to love him just as much as she did when she was a young girl; when he had suggested that it was time for her to take a husband, she had wept and wailed and clung to his kimono, begging him to reconsider. He did reconsider – who would want such an inconsistent female as the mother of his children? But also, she would be unhappy if she left. She insisted that she wanted to be there with him, rather than with any young, upstart lord who offered for her hand, and he had listened. Her wishes should be inconsequential, but they weren't, and he allowed her to stay in his house and tend his gardens and spend long hours combing her long, glossy black hair instead of moving forward with her life and finding a husband and starting a family. In the distant parts of his mind that Sesshoumaru tried to ignore, he wondered if, in halting the natural progression of her life, he had halted the natural progression of her aging as well, but he could smell the constant growth on her, and knew that it wasn't so. She was a young woman now. Sometimes she was a stranger with Rin's face, but when she laughed she was still that little human girl who had brought him rank fish and suspicious mushrooms and who had smiled at him with broken teeth.

She wasn't laughing now. Instead she looked rather sullen, as if she had eaten a particularly bad bit of fruit and was feeling the roiling consequences. Still, that damn pout made him squint harder, as if he could divine her desires by willpower alone.

He felt silly. He should be able to see whatever she wanted him to see – it was

impossible that his demon sight would be less than her human vision – but the wall of his house remained as dull as ever. Perhaps this was some sort of Zen exercise that she had picked up from one of the wandering monks that he periodically abducted for her educational purposes? The thought made him cringe a little; Rin considered herself rather superior in several areas already (Myouga had assured him that this was also an entirely normal development) and the last thing he needed was a scrap of girl who had found the Truth. The Truth was usually annoying and always inconvenient, and rarely seemed to agree with the truth in any case. The Truth might say that staring at a wall was significant in the time spent searching for what was real, whereas the truth was that staring at a wall was boring and significant only in that he was far too soft where she was concerned.

He should send her away. She was trouble. She was weakness. At least, this is what his advisors told him, but Sesshoumaru ignored them; he owned her life, and she was his until such a time as it pleased him to release her. Besides, she needed to grow out of this bizarre phase in which she swung between moods like a crazed monkey. He'd never find any lord on whom to pawn her off if she kept it up. On the other hand, perhaps this was her plan... Sesshoumaru frowned. He found he didn't like this thought at all. He was, after all, an inu-youkai. He wore the form of a human being, but his basic instincts were straightforward and to the point without any messing about in subtleties. Intrigue did not come easily to him, but Rin was human. She could be quite cunning when it came down to it; perhaps he should marry her off as soon as possible and go back to his normal, drunk monkey-free life.

"Do you see it now?" she asked, cutting into his reverie. He could hear a note of petulance creeping into her tone.

Sesshoumaru said nothing, and Rin gave a huge sigh of impatience and grabbed his half-empty sleeve. In another five years she would be able to grab his hand again when his arm had grown back entirely, but for now he was glad she didn't take such liberties with his person. He was content to let her lead him with scraps of his kimono, as long as no one else saw.

She stopped directly in front of the wall. "Here," she said, and pointed.

Sesshoumaru leaned in closer until his nose was nearly touching the wood. He was silent for a long while, and Rin held her breath.

"Yes?" he finally said, knowing it would annoy her.

"Sesshoumaru-sama," she cried. "Don't you see?"

He turned his gaze to her; in all, she was more pleasant to look at than a wall. "Yes?" he said again.

Rin huffed, peeved. "Right here," she said, and ran her fingers along a slender shoot of green that Sesshoumaru hadn't noticed before. He stepped back in surprise.

He honestly hadn't seen it; why would he pay attention to green stems that wove themselves over the wood and stone when they would die in a year and the wood and stone would endure much longer? He had rebuilt the House of the Moon and supervised the laying of these very stones and timbers, and now spread over them in a soft lacework of spring were hundreds and hundreds of stems, growing deep within the cracks and spreading insidiously across the surface. He didn't have to ask to know that Rin had planted the seeds. He had raised the wall, but somehow she had set her mark on it. How odd that it should happen like this, he thought to himself.

"I see," he said.

"Watch," she whispered fiercely. The sky behind his home was still inky and black, but he could feel the world turning; dawn wasn't far away. Sesshoumaru kept his eyes trained on the delicate knots of green that had invaded his home without anyone realizing it.

Sesshoumaru was not known for his patience, but he kept his eyes trained on the wall, every once in a while letting his gaze move deliberately from one area to another. Occasionally he would let his eyes gaze for a while at one area, and then at another; when he returned to the first area, something would be different. Tiny white specks were appearing up and down the lacework beneath the light of the moon and stars, and each time he looked away and looked back, they became larger and larger.

Ever so slowly, but also so very quickly, the wall burst into silent bloom. Beneath his watchful eyes, Sesshoumaru saw hundreds and hundreds of

luminous white blossoms open and bathe themselves in the light of the night sky.

As the horizon behind the House of the Moon turned grey, Rin let out a whoosh of air, as though she had been holding her breath. "Isn't it lovely?" she asked him. Sesshoumaru didn't answer, but Rin seemed content enough that he had watched the wall turn from dead, cold material into warm, bursting life.

He stretched out a hand and cupped a bloom against his fingers. The petals felt almost like powdery silk to the touch, and he held it for a long time. The way the flowers had blossomed had been remarkable. It was almost as if the universe had sped up and opened them just for him. He had watched the growth of the flowers in less than an hour; they had bloomed before his very eyes, just like Rin.

"They are beautiful," he said. The human girl at his elbow beamed widely.

"I planted them myself," she said, rather gratuitously. Who else would plant them? He just nodded, and Rin took this as approval.

"They're called moonflowers, and I thought they were particularly appropriate, since we live in the House of the Moon. Of course," she prattled on, "they don't live very long; not far past dawn, actually, and they're pretty susceptible to cold, but I think that just for the small amount of time they live that it's worth it. They seem to shine like the moon, ne?"

"They die quickly?" he asked.

Rin nodded, but she sighed happily. "It's nice to watch them grow, but I don't want to be around when they droop. It's so much more pleasant that way. Don't you agree, Sesshoumaru-sama?"

The wind was cold and the dawn was coming, and the flowers shone, bright and beautiful, just for a moment in time.

Sesshoumaru said nothing. He merely stared at the wall of doomed flowers and tried not to think in metaphors.

* * *

Kagome stood in the shrine gazing down into the empty, useless well. All around her was the soft rustling of the wind as it whispered through the tiny cracks between the timbers of the shrine, and the spring air smelled like flowers and sweet milk. The blood-red sun, setting in the sky, warmed her back and gilded her black hair a glittering gold. In the corners, shadows shifted and moved with the turning of the world, and beneath her the darkness of the well sighed without breath.

Kagome stared into it, waiting.

After a while she growled and threw a rock into it.

"Stupid well," she muttered. "Why do you have to be so difficult?"

The well said nothing, just sat there with its gaping mouth and mocked her silently.

Kagome passed a hand across her furrowed forehead, silently willing the pounding in her temples to go away. She couldn't count how many times she had leapt into those depths over the years, but she probably didn't have enough fingers or toes. The memories were so vivid, too: the sensation of falling with the air rushing through her hair, the tickling in her stomach, even the occasional misfired landing were so familiar and even welcome to her that even now, years away from her last trip to the past, she could still summon the feeling of anticipation that accompanied her each time into the streams of time. Desperately, she wanted to feel those things again, but she knew better. Her secret attempts after it was all over never failed to end in bruises and tears.

The last time she'd tried to go back again she had broken her ankle and sat on the ground of the well as the pain set in and she had watered the floor with her tears until her grandfather had found her. Souta, growing like a weed at that point, had been compelled to carry her up the ladder himself as she sobbed into his shoulder like a child. It was then that she had known that the past was gone for good, and nothing she could do would bring it back. But still, in her heart, there was that small, niggling hope, irrational and seductive,

always telling her that maybe this time, it would work. This time... maybe...

Kagome threw another rock into the shadows beneath her and sighed heavily as she shook her head. "This is stupid," she told herself. "Stupid. Just because you read a story you think you should be able to go back in time again. Stupid." Behind her, a bird chirped as if in agreement with this conclusion. Kagome considered throwing a rock at it as well, but after a brief struggle decided she probably deserved the chastisement.

It was stupid, and she knew it. She could never go back again, and she might as well stop daydreaming, because all she was doing was wasting time.

And yet… there was something about that horrible story that made her want to try. All day she merely had to close her eyes and she was visited with visions of a little girl, broken and butchered and laying in the dust far from the one she loved, and it made Kagome's fingers itch and her heart pound with a surprising and frightening intensity in her chest. She could smell the blood on the earth, and hear the crackle of flames, and echoing in her mind was the cruel laughter of those who callously betrayed their lord and his ward. It was so horribly distracting that Kagome had nearly wandered straight into the path of an oncoming bus in her reverie.

There was a pain in her jaw, and Kagome realized that she had been clenching her teeth. The pain didn't seem to matter, though. You deserve it, she thought, her mouth thinning into a white line. You couldn't go back for Inuyasha. You couldn't go back for love. What makes you think this time will be any different?

Below, the shadows seemed to shiver and move. In her chest, she could feel her heart leap unbidden even as the cold knowledge that it was just her imagination settled around her.

God, but this was frustrating. Kagome ran a hand through her hair and gave the well a kick, which only earned her a throbbing toe. "Let me in!" she said angrily. "I don't care, let me in!"

The well just sat there and guarded its secrets. Suddenly Kagome slammed a fist down on the lip. "Dammit!" Nothing had changed, and jumping in only meant pain and possibly bruises, and she couldn't go back again. A story

would not open the well, and all the wanting in the world would just leave her cold and alone.

Nothing is different, she thought. Nothing at all. Kagome turned and climbed the steps of the shrine to the outside world. It was time for dinner again, and then time for sleep, and there would never be any time to reclaim what was lost. No time at all.

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Chapter Two

"An optimist is one who thinks the future is uncertain." -- Anonymous

* * *

Sesshoumaru, the Prince of the Western Lands, King of the Moonlit Country, and Lord of the House of the Moon, quietly reflected that he should have never told Rin what sort of youkai he was. He should have told her something – anything – other than a dog. Anything. A rat, or a spider, even. Females didn't like those, did they? Anything so that he wouldn't have to endure this torture whenever she wanted to wake him up. Although, knowing Rin, he would have found cheese shoved under his door or dead flies at the bottom of the tea pot. His mouth twisted ruefully. Perhaps it was not so bad after all.

Oh, but he was tired. All he wanted was five more minutes. Just five more minutes with his head on his pillow and the heavy blanket draped over him, keeping out the creeping chill of the fading winter. Sesshoumaru wondered, idly, just what he would do for a respite. In the strange spaces between waking and dreaming, the demon frowned in thought.

The Tetsusaiga, he thought. I'd trade that away. I'd betray my family to the youkai taiji-ya. I'd betray myself to the taiji-ya, but just give me a pillow on the chopping block. Five more minutes was all he needed, but the universe – or rather, Rin – had other ideas.

He hadn't slept very much in recent weeks – months even – and the first chance he had to finally catch a bit of rest, the one person he would feel guilty about killing had been sent to wake him up by inflicting upon him one of his least favorite tortures.

Sesshoumaru, reigning Taiyoukai of the West, was getting his ears scratched.

Drifting up from the deep well of sleep, Sesshoumaru tried to quantify just how much he hated the feel of small, dull human fingernails scratching down the ridge of his skull just behind his ears, but found that it was impossible to put into words. He hated it more than invaders, more than cloak-and-dagger politics, more than upstart rebels. He hated it even more than getting his stomach rubbed, which was another of Rin's bright ideas that had dawned upon her after she had learned just what sort of demon he was when she was much smaller. In fact, she should have grown out of it by now. Surely it was indecent.

She was still scratching his ears. He hated that.

Letting a deep rumble of displeasure bubble up from his chest, he turned on his bed, away from the maddeningly tickling fingers and the bright, girlish laugh that flowed forth, full of pleasure, no doubt at his discomfort. Damn.

Insufferable child.

Who had let her in here anyway? There was supposed to be a servant posted outside all night, although he was not so unconscious as to be unable to deduce that her presence indicated that security was getting lax. Or the servant had let her inside. Insufferable, damnable servants. Well. Servants were fairly expendable – he wouldn't feel too bad about killing one of them, just to set an example. On the other hand, it was so hard to find servants who adhered to his standards that he would feel guilty wasting good training.

There was nothing for it, it seemed. He would have to wake up.

Slowly, the most powerful youkai in all the land opened his cold golden eyes, fixed his ward with a stare of ice and summoned his most authoritative and threatening voice.

"Go. Away."

Wide brown eyes stared back, before a grin like a half moon split Rin's face and she propelled herself across the low bed to latch onto his neck, arms squeezing his throat with admirable force. Sesshoumaru wondered why he ever thought that would work. It never worked, at least not with her. How very, very vexing. He flexed his poisoned claws, trying to think very deliberately and seriously about teaching her a painful and possibly terminal lesson, but his heart just didn't seem to be in it anymore.

He was getting soft in his... youth.

Damn.

"What is it, Rin?" he asked wearily, his very tone endeavoring to suggest that

he suffered more frustration and torment than even Sisyphus, and that it was all her fault. As usual, she didn't take the hint.

"Sesshoumaru-sama," she keened, "today you have to make your journey! Remember?"

Sesshoumaru tried to think, and bought himself some time by carefully but forcefully disentangling Rin's arms from around his neck. He kept his face passive as his thoughts ran around in panicked circles.

Journey? he thought frantically. What journey? A dim, half-realized specter rose in the back of his mind; cold, uncomfortable, and only slightly unexpected, like stepping in a pile of horse manure in the middle of the night. He was going to... the North, was it? Yes, probably. Was that today? he wondered. Oh, well, someone would be sure to tell him once he was up and dressed.

"Rin," he said.

She blinked up at him impishly. Her hair was drawn back in a strange weave today and there were flowers in it – moonflowers, if he remembered correctly, which he probably didn't – and she was sitting on his sleeping mat as if she had every right to be there. "Yes, Sesshoumaru-sama?" she said brightly.

"Leave."

Just a few short years ago she would have smiled and complied, but now she just pulled her lower lip into a pout. "But Sesshoumaru-sama – " she began.

"Out. Now. I must get dressed," he told her in a voice that he hoped brooked no argument.

She lowered her eyes, but the pout remained. "All right," she said sullenly before rising and exiting the room. As she slid the door closed Sesshoumaru sighed and looked down at his mussed kimono. Why hadn't he done something about her yet? Somehow it always seemed to slip his mind.

He slowly disrobed before retrieving his heavy silk kimono and hakama and slipping into them. Perhaps there was just no time to do something with her, he mused as he tied himself into his clothes and shrugged into his armor. In any case, despite the fact that he had just awakened it was too late to send her away today; he had to leave. Or something. Sesshoumaru vainly struggled to remember what his specific mission was supposed to be, but the particulars eluded him. By the time he had strapped on his armor and slid his swords into place, he was almost positive he was traveling to the North to deal with the various lords there, but the whys and wherefores still escaped his grasp.

Peace treaty? Unlikely. Social call? No, probably not. Rebellion? There were so many of those annoying things it seemed as though he had to go out once a week to lay waste to some upstart youkai or another that sought to overthrow him. It was pathetic, really. A worthy opponent would be nice, but was usually a mixed blessing; in a way Sesshoumaru was happy that all the rebellions he had dealt with during his tenure were so tedious. What else… a border dispute? Yes, that might be it. Yes, that was probably what it was.

Sesshoumaru slid the shoji screen open and walked into the hall, pleased with himself that he had figured out at least one of the complex problems that surrounded him in Gordian knots, not that it really mattered in the end. A sword could solve all knotty questions and still leave time for a cup of tea; whatever problem faced him, he would cut right through it and be home in a few days. Plan securely in his mind, Sesshoumaru entered the sparse room where he held his household briefings to find his top advisor, Riui, already waiting for him.

* * *

"Ayumi-chan, I really think you broke my brain," Kagome complained as she rubbed her temples in small circles. Kagome knew that she was by no means an idiot, but she had never been the best at math and geometry. Now that Ayumi was majoring in physics Kagome felt even dumber than when she was just a teenager trying to understand a crippling number of axioms and theorems by the light of the fire in the Sengoku Jidai.

"But you were the one who asked about time-travel and paradoxes," Ayumi said reasonably. "Besides, this is a fairy tale, Kagome-chan. It isn't real, you know."

Kagome wanted to bang her head against a wall; for being so smart, Ayumi could be rather unimaginative. "I was just using this story as an example."

Ayumi, sitting in her chair while Kagome curled up on the bed and picked at loose threads in Ayumi's bedspread, placed a delicate, lady-like finger on her lips and tilted her head to the side as she studied Kagome's notes. After a moment she smiled gently. "I can see why you would want to save the girl in the story – it's very sad, after all – but it would probably be impossible to do so."

"But why?" Kagome asked. God, this thread is being difficult, she thought grumpily as she loosened another stitch. "Wouldn't the story change as soon as I made the decision to go back in time and save her or something?"

Ayumi shook her head. "You can't do that sort of thing with time travel. One of two things would happen. You'd go back and fail, because what's in the past has already happened, or you'd create a quantum split, where you save the girl and create a parallel universe to which you probably wouldn't return when you travel forward again."

Kagome blinked as she was momentarily distracted from her delicate thread-unraveling operation.

"But... she would still be alive in another universe, right?" she said, trying to hide the hope in her voice. Even if she knew that Kagome had actually met, touched, and spoken to the characters in this long-forgotten fairytale, Ayumi would never understand why the face of Sesshoumaru's little girl had floated behind Kagome's eyes all night, looking bright and happy and filled with a love for life that was so rare in any time. Kagome's one conversation with the little girl had revealed that Rin had known misery and grief and even death. And yet, she was still so happy. It was a sharp contrast to those around her who simply endured life in the midst of the twin plagues of war and poverty.

Kagome knew she could never explain to her friend who had never seen battle or death why the injustice, the abject cruelty of it all had settled its claws into her stomach and was slowly shredding her to tiny pieces.

Ayumi didn't seem to notice anything strange about Kagome's concern. "Well, if the whole parallel universe theory is true, she probably wouldn't have died in another timeline if she were a real person. But the story in our timeline is that she died. So you can't really change it," she replied as she leafed through Kagome's notebook.

Kagome hooked a fingernail beneath the next stitch of the loose thread and frowned. That couldn't be right, could it? She changed the past by going back, didn't she? Or... perhaps she didn't. Perhaps the past had always been that way, and not going back in time would have changed it, and...

Kagome groaned and buried her head in a pillow. Her brain hurt.

"Kagome-chan, don't get so worked up over this!" Ayumi said lightly. "It's just a story your professor told you, right? It didn't really happen, so there's no

need to think about it, right?"

Kagome just nodded into the pillow, not trusting herself to speak as a shining little girl ran through her mind.

Maybe she was using this as an excuse to try again. It hadn't been very long since she had been in the Sengoku Jidai; Miroku and Sango probably had babies, and Shippou was growing up, and Rin would still be alive and she could see them all and Rin wouldn't have to die...

Yet if she somehow managed to return she would have to see Inuyasha too. He was probably still alive as well, and just recalling his face to mind caused a bolt of ice to lance through her heart as easily as a blade through a boil.

Inuyasha... and Kikyou...

Ayumi was shaking her shoulder and Kagome forcibly wrested her thoughts away from the phantom pain of lost opportunity as she lifted her head.

"Come on, Kagome!" Ayumi said brightly. "This is all just theoretical anyway. We can't go back in time, and the story is a fantasy. Let's go get some breakfast before classes start."

Kagome only nodded in response.

* * *

Riui looked up at his lord and master, who stared down at the documents in

front of him with fierce concentration. Golden eyes bore down into the paper as if Sesshoumaru thought he could divine the future from the words written there.

How noble and dedicated! Riui thought to himself as he stole quick glances at the intense face of his lord as Sesshoumaru studied the maps and various treaties Riui had unearthed from the library. He must be thinking of his negotiating strategy.

‘I will drink and drink this sake. If I drink... If I drink...' If I drink... wait, what was that next line? Sesshoumaru thought to himself as he let his unfocused eyes rest on the paleness of the papers in front of him; as long as he allowed his eyes to blur, all the messy writing before him faded into soothing smudges and eased his headache. He was a bit peeved that the melody he only half-remembered from his days traveling in the small territory to the south was also escaping him. He couldn't quite recall the nuances at the end of the first line.

Riui didn't dare move. If he disturbed his lord while he was thinking, he might lose his thread of thought and be angry. Perhaps he was thinking of the perfect plan at this very moment! The very moment Riui felt the horrible need to scratch his nose! Riui hoped it would go away if he concentrated very, very hard. Risking another glance, the old advisor wondered if Sesshoumaru's hearing was so great that he could detect the movement of eyeballs in their sockets, but when his master did not stir from his position Riui relaxed. Maybe if he moved very, very slowly, he could get at that damnable itch and not disturb Sesshoumaru. With more patience than he thought he possessed, Riui very carefully lifted a hand above the table and started the torturously slow journey to his face.

‘If I drink, I will get the... I will get the... the finest spear in the land of the rising sun...' That's the line! Sesshoumaru thought triumphantly and allowed himself a small mental celebration. It lasted for a few moments before a small but niggling suspicion caught his attention. Inwardly, Sesshoumaru frowned and went back over the little melody.

‘I will get the finest spear in the land of the rising sun'? he repeated very slowly to himself. He'd never thought of it before, but that line sounded awfully suggestive. ‘If I drink, I will get the finest spear in the land of the rising sun.' Oh, bugger. Why did folk songs have to be so damn tricky? Out of the corner of his unfocused eye, Sesshoumaru caught a bit of movement. Instinctively he tensed –

It was just Riui, reaching for his face, albeit in a manner more suited to someone moving through thick mud.

"What are you doing?"

Riui started guiltily and immediately pushed himself back from the short table to press his face into the ground. "Forgive me for interrupting your thoughts, Sesshoumaru-sama!" he cried. "I did not want to disturb you by moving too quickly, but it seems that I have done so anyway! Please forgive me, my lord! I won't do it again, I'll cut off my nose, forgive me!"

Vaguely, Sesshoumaru wondered if all his servants received groveling lessons from Jaken; it would certainly explain the constant bobbing in the dirt and long strings of apologies and excuses when a simple "gomen nasai" would suffice. Well, it didn't really matter, he supposed. As long as they were suitably deferential they were safe.

Casting a quick glance over the documents in front of him, Sesshoumaru decided his headache was too great to bother trying to understand the treaties made before his tenure. He would just wing it like he always did. Who needed plans when you could think on your feet? Plans were for dealing with long-term enemies, not people with whom you had never met before. Comfortable in his decision, Sesshoumaru rose to his feet, turned his back on the still pleading advisor, and exited the room.

Riui glanced up to see his lord leave the room. Oh no, is he angry with me? Am I going to be punished? he thought, his stomach twisting in horrible knots. He listened with dread as Sesshoumaru's footsteps retreated from his range of hearing.

What was that next line? Sesshoumaru mused as he walked down the hallway toward the front door of the manor. Maybe Myoga would know. Sesshoumaru made a mental note to ask the old flea the next time he passed through, which he did with increasing frequency now that Inuyasha was dead. Besides, Sesshoumaru had more important things to do; the sooner he was gone, the sooner he could return.

Jaken was already at the head of the path down the mountainside, Aun's reigns in his tiny green hands. Sesshoumaru took them from him and began to walk.

"Stay here," he said to his retainer as he moved down the pathway. "Make sure things run smoothly."

"Hai, Sesshoumaru-sama!" Jaken exclaimed enthusiastically behind him. Sesshoumaru didn't bother to acknowledge the response. Beside him, Aun grunted.

‘I will drink and drink this sake. If I drink I will get the finest spear in the land of the rising sun...' he sang inside his head as they descended the mountain until the melody was interrupted by a high, feminine voice piping up from the crest of the road.

"Sesshoumaru-sama!"

As though he were a dog on a leash, Sesshoumaru stopped in his tracks and

turned to glance behind him, looking up the length of path he had already traversed. At the top stood Rin in a light pink kimono, hair billowing around her in the sweetly icy wind of early springtime.

"Come home soon!" she called down to him, and he could hear a girlish giggle floating on the breeze.

Sesshoumaru said nothing, and continued down the mountain. He would be home soon enough, and they could see each other again. Rin would wait for him.

He could still hear her laughter even when she was gone from his sight.

* * *

A note on the song Sesshoumaru is singing in his head: it's a real song called Kuroda Bushi, though I had to change it just a little bit. Its origins are from around 1600. 1600 is, of course, after the time this particular part of the story takes place, but I'm guessing that like most folk songs it evolved from an earlier version of itself. Well, who cares anyway? You can find a recording and explanation of it here: http://jtrad.columbia.jp/eng/m_minyo.html

Tales from the House of the Moon
by

Resmiranda

Chapter Three

"Nothing is more responsible for the good old days than a bad memory." -- Franklin P. Adams

* * *

Kagome stared at her cup of tea and brooded. She was getting really good at brooding these days. She felt like she had been running for a long time but even though she was stumbling and her breath burned in her lungs, the past was catching up with her with alarming speed. Dating, parties, movies, books, schoolwork – suddenly it all just seemed like a distraction from everything she had left behind. In this time, she was alive, but all her friends, the bonds she had forged in the temporally distant but emotionally recent past, seemed to hover over her shoulders, casting their eyes upon her as she made her way through life.

She knew they were all dead, every last one of them… well, maybe not Shippou, but wouldn't he have tried to contact her by now? But knowing intellectually and realizing it in her heart were two different things. Even now there was still the lingering hope that if she leapt over the rim of the well she could tumble down through time, and they would be waiting on the other side.

Miroku would laugh and Sango would shout her name and Shippou would bound toward her. Kaede would still be in her hut, banking fires and protecting her village. And Inuyasha, human now, would open his arms and welcome her like a friend. And Kikyou with her new soul might smile gently and hold her hands. And Kagome would be happy for them.

Maybe.

Kagome bit her lip and stared into the dark brown depths of her tea where her silhouette was outlined in its surface. She was a horrible person. She should be happy that Inuyasha and Kikyou were together again – it was the way it should have been since the beginning. Even her romantic side felt a twinge of

contentment thinking about it; it was as though something stunted had been completed again, as if instead of panicking Juilet had called the paramedics and they had arrived at the last moment and pumped Romeo's stomach and the destined couple had been able to continue their love story. All that hideous tragedy had been rewritten, and the happiness those two outcasts deserved was finally delivered.

Even so, it didn't stop the still-fading pain of rejection.

I should probably be over this by now, shouldn't I? Kagome asked herself as she took a sip of tea. It's not very mature to still be hung up on what amounts to a high school crush.

It didn't feel like a crush, though. It felt like she had been denied something deep and fundamental, and there was an itch in her heart that whispered to her, telling her that she might not be the only reincarnation; if she could just find him again, she could be happy. Then again, Kaede had always told her she should be happy with what she was given, not expect life to suddenly bring her happiness. It was difficult advice for a teenager to swallow, and Kagome found it was still hard to stomach.

She sighed and let her head fall forward so that her hair covered her eyes. She felt a little lost inside her own skin; it was a weird feeling, as if she were too small for the person she had become. Kagome slowly lowered her head to the cool table in front of her and breathed deeply, trying to remember. It all seemed so long ago.

Kikyou, revived, filled with a new soul given to her by the Shikon no Tama, and Inuyasha, finally human, were building their own home at the outskirts of the village. Even from inside Kaede's hut, Kagome could hear them constructing it, bickering sweetly and softly to each other, and she just wanted to shove her head into a hole and never surface again.

"Don't fret, child," Kaede finally said quietly as she filled Kagome's bowl with thick stew. "It was not your destiny."

It was impossible to speak. Kagome just shook her head, afraid that if she opened her mouth she would begin to cry. And it wasn't even as if she had anyone to blame but herself. It had been her pure wish on the jewel pried

from Naraku's corpse that had set this in motion, and even though the battle had been over a week ago she was still in the Sengoku Jidai, unable to move on. She sipped her stew quietly.

The silence stretched out, long and almost tangible. Kaede finally spoke gently. "Kagome?"

It was too much. Kagome looked up, food forgotten. "Then why did I have to meet him in the first place?" she whispered. "What is my destiny, what was my purpose here, if I had to meet him and then let go of him again?"

Kaede's eyes softened, and she sighed as she settled back. "Kagome, your purpose here was to defeat an evil being. It was to save your friends. And perhaps, to a lesser extent, it was to redeem Inuyasha's wild heart."

Her nose stung with hot, unshed tears and she lowered her head. "If I redeemed his heart, why didn't he love me? Why couldn't my destiny have been to be with him?"

A wrinkled old hand grasped her own and folded it in warm, papery skin. "Look at me, child."

Slowly, Kagome lifted her head, and as she did a single tear slipped down her cheek.

Kaede gestured to herself with her free hand. "Child, I am old. I have never known love. If my onee-san had lived, I would have been able to have the family I wanted. But it didn't happen that way. Onee-san died, and I had to fill her place. It's been over fifty years since that happened, but I can't be bitter about it. I've lived my life as the miko of this village; clearly it was my destiny to be so. What we want and what is meant for us are two different things. Unless you accept your fate, you will be unhappy."

In Kaede's eyes, Kagome could see her own sadness reflected. She had never thought how the older miko must have felt, but suddenly it seemed cruel to talk to Kaede about her petty thoughts. She was still young, still freshly alive, and all her sadness couldn't disguise the fact that her life was unrolling in front of her, a slumbering country waiting for her steps. For Kaede, tomorrow was the past, but for Kagome, it was the future.

Kagome lowered her eyes and nodded.

"Good, child. Now eat up before it gets cold."

"Nee-chan!"

Jerking her head off the table, Kagome sat up abruptly with her heart in her throat. "God, Souta, you scared me!"

Her little brother, now not so little, snorted. "I was just wondering what's for dinner," he said petulantly. "Mom isn't home yet, so I thought you might be cooking."

Kagome scrubbed her eyes and looked at her watch. It wasn't terribly late yet, so she probably still had time to make something relatively nourishing.

"Well… how about chicken?" she asked.

"Sounds great!" Souta said. "Can we have radish with it?"

"I don't see why not. But you have to help!"

Souta shrugged. "Okay. But I'm not chopping anything. I almost cut off my finger last time."

Kagome just rolled her eyes and stood up. She began to gather ingredients from around the kitchen, but even though her brother was there distracting her, she still felt the pull of the past on her heart, and the dread of the future in her mind. She would have difficulty going to sleep tonight.

* * *

He had never really felt dread before, but when he crested the hill that led to his mountainside home and saw the smoke Sesshoumaru had known what it must have been like for his dead brother for most of his life, always knowing something horrible was out there and there might not be a way to fight it. Now he stood where his front gates had once been, and the dread had been

replaced with something cold and unfeeling.

I was only gone three days, Sesshoumaru thought distantly. Only three days. How…?

Before his eyes, the House of the Moon was crumbling into burning rubble. He was only abstractly aware of the crack and tumble of seasoned timbers and the far off laughter of youkai as they destroyed his home. The roar of the flames was muted by the roaring of the blood in his ears.

How can my blood still be flowing, he thought, when my heart has stopped?

Blood. His blood was flowing, and so was the blood of everyone who had lived in the House of the Moon. The only difference was that his veins were closed, while his faithful servants were spilled out all around him. He could almost taste it on his tongue. The demon lord's stomach heaved violently at the all-pervading stench of blood and ashes that crawled through his nose; his lungs were clogged with it and he couldn't breathe, except he was breathing, because the stench intensified with each horrible inhalation. Each slip of air curled inside him, choking and insidious. It was in his hair and clothes, seeping into his skin like poison.

The air was so thick it was almost sticky. It settled on him, lifted his hair ponderously in rancid waves, and coated him in its corruption, heavy and malodorous.

He was moving forward now. Behind him, he heard the sad keening of Aun as the dragon backed away from the terrible scent flowing from the burning house. Beneath his feet the ground was hard but slippery; puddles of thick, red blood mixed with the earth, giving off the hard metallic scent of iron. It disgusted him in confusing ways – he'd never balked at the scent of blood before – but he walked on resolutely, even as the smell of iron and salt snaked around his shoes, curled around his form.

There was so much blood everywhere that it seemed almost unreal. But it was real. He watched as the roof of the house caved in just a little bit more, waiting for something to snap inside him but instead he felt numb. He should feel angry, but instead he wanted to sink to the ground and sleep. All he had fought to build and keep was falling down around him, and all because he had left on

a simple journey.

His foot hit something. Sesshoumaru looked down.

It was a severed hand.

In the ghastly light of the fire, he could see that it was pale and bloodless, and on it was a scent he knew so well…

Her scent was all around this area. Off to his right he could detect the sour smell of semen, spilled on the ground, and the rankness of urine and excrement covered the small patch of earth. The smell was hers.

The knowledge crept into his brain, settling around his chest with cold coils of dread and denial, but there was no denying it. She had lain here while they raped her – too many to count, the acrid smell of sweat lay beneath the other odors – and then she had been disemboweled. No, not disemboweled…

Curving off in at least ten different directions was the almost undetectable trail of Rin, dragging blood and tears and the stink of internal organs behind her, and Sesshoumaru knew.

She had been butchered. They had sliced her into pieces, and carried her off where he could not reach her, where Tenseiga could not find her. She was gone.

Not five feet away was a gray green smudge on the ground. Jaken. He must have tried to protect her, and now he was just a smear of blood and guts against the grass.

Another burning timber fell, but Sesshoumaru ignored it. Next to the horrible wreckage of his retainer was a scrap of cloth. Moving as though he were in a dream – a horrible dream, from which he could wake up, from which he could never wake up – Sesshoumaru moved toward it and knelt, ignoring the hideous blackness of the bloody ground that would transfer to his snow-white clothes. His fingers felt hollow, like the bones of birds, as he touched the cloth and brought it to his face.

It was a deep indigo blue, with a trace of pink on one ragged edge. It smelled

like Rin; soaked with her blood and her tears, the scrap of cloth tickled his nose, but felt like nothing in his nerveless palm.

She really loved that kimono, he thought nonsensically. I think it was her favorite. Not knowing why, he tucked it into his obi and straightened.

There was nothing left except the smells of suffering, and for a long time Sesshoumaru stood in the dying light of the day, in the dying light of his life, and breathed death.

"Ah, Sesshoumaru. We wondered when you'd come home," a voice behind him finally said.

Sesshoumaru refused to turn around. He wasn't going to acknowledge the voice, for it was the voice of one of his father's most loyal vassals, Naketsu. Naketsu, he thought, and on the wind, above the stench of death, were others… Jurekaru, Hatore, Suikoshin… lords he had known from birth, all of them traitors, inconstant, succumbing to the whims of their selfish desires… He should be so angry.

But instead there was just a yawning emptiness inside him, and he knew instinctively that could never be filled. All the anger in the world would just disappear into its echoing depths; all his wounded pride and cherished vengeance and denied desire would be swallowed up, never to resurface. There was adrenaline running, humming beneath his skin, but he was hollow, a shell covered in a shadow of rage. He could feel nothing.

The inferno of his ancestral home roared and belched a dying breath to the sky.

"She should have run." It was the voice of Jurekaru, a horse youkai who had taught Sesshoumaru how to fight against energy attacks and how to run swiftly and avoid obstacles.

At his side, his poisoned claws twitched reflexively of their own volition.

Behind him, someone snickered. There was red fog covering his vision, and Sesshoumaru blinked to clear it. He'd thought his heart had stopped, but that was not the case, for he could feel it thundering in his chest. From some

strange, detached corner of his mind, he watched himself with mild disinterest. The red fog wasn't going away.

"At least she was a bit of fun," said the gravelly tones of Suikoshin, who had been his father's best friend when Sesshoumaru was still a pup, and the scratching tones of his voice sounded like splintering wood.

"Traitors," Sesshoumaru said, and he sounded to himself as though he were far, far away.

"Your father fell because he was protecting a human woman and these lands were chaos for many years until you finally took over. We saw you following in his footsteps. What were we to do?"

Not this, Sesshoumaru thought. The red in his vision was being replaced with darkness.

"Sesshoumaru! Catch."

Slowly, he turned around, his hand already raised with fingers outstretched, and something thick and silky tangled in his claws.

It was her hair. Thick, glossy, so well cared for that it was a wonder she found time to even dress herself, and now it was caught and twisted around his fingers, sliced from her head. It clung to his skin and his armor, grasping tendrils wrapping themselves around him, and it felt so heavy he thought he would fall to his knees.

He didn't even move as the chains came, seemingly from nowhere, and wrapped themselves around his limbs, twisting and turning until he was immobilized and on his knees. He kept his face blank.

Suikoshin's feet were in front of his eyes. "We won't kill you out of respect for your father. But those chains were forged by a black miko – good luck getting out of them."

Sesshoumaru said nothing as they lifted him up and carried him away. He made no noise as they traveled to the coast, was silent as Suikoshin taunted him, remained mute when Hatore expressed regret.

He didn't make a sound until they tossed him over the edge of the cliff and into the sea, and then he roared so loudly his throat tore and bled as the sea rose up to claim him.

* * *

In the darkness of the night, Kagome's eyes shot open and a cry escaped her throat as she sat up straight in her bed.

"Oh, god," she breathed as she pressed a hand to her chest, feeling the thunder of her heart against her ribcage. She had been falling off a cliff, watching as the rocks above her retreated against the sky, felt how the hungry waves had closed over her head. It was almost as if she had been in that damn story, bound with chains. She couldn't move, and then she couldn't breathe, and she just wanted to die.

Kagome passed a hand across her brow, and her fingers felt chilly sweat there.

"I don't think I can take much more of this," she whispered out loud to herself before reaching a resolution.

She would try one more time. She was positive that the story wouldn't have been revealed to her if she couldn't change it; Ayumi would probably say that it was impossible to pass back through time through an old well in a shrine, but that didn't mean it hadn't happened.

But first, a shower. Grabbing her dressing gown from the back of her door, Kagome paced quickly down the hallway and into the bathroom. Quickly and efficiently she disrobed and washed away the cold sweat of her dream. She also washed her hair just for good measure, just in case it did work and she had to hang out in the past for a while. She hated grimy hair.

Stepping out of the bathtub, Kagome quickly toweled herself off. What next? she asked herself. Obviously she would have to pack. Swiftly she retrieved the old first-aid kit from beneath the sink before grabbing a few toiletries and her toothbrush. She exited the bathroom and reentered her room. Perusing her closet, she grabbed a few comfortable changes of clothes before unearthing

her yellow backpack from under her bed. Quickly she began to stow her things away as she bit her lip. She didn't want to get her hopes up, but this felt so familiar, she couldn't help but feel it was as though she were back in high school, packing up things to go back in time. She felt happy again.

"Nee-chan, what are you doing?"

Kagome looked up from her task; she hadn't even noticed her brother in her doorway.

"Souta, go back to bed. You have school tomorrow."

Souta frowned. He looked a bit ridiculous in his too-small pajamas, but he was definitely growing up. He crossed his arms. "So do you," he countered. "But instead of sleeping, your hair is wet and you look like you're going out of town. What's going on?"

Kagome bit her lip. "I'm going back, Souta."

A look of pity crawled onto her brother's face. "Kagome…" he said.

"I don't want to hear it!" she said swiftly. "I just have to try one more time. Okay?"

"Nee-chan, you've tried," he said quietly. He had uncrossed his arms, and the look he was giving her cut her to the bone. He thought she was living in the past, and Kagome didn't know what to say to explain to him why she needed to try, one last time. She could still recall the smell of blood in her dream, the feeling of falling, all those horrible things that would happen if she didn't go back and change it. She could save Rin. She could save her and someone would have a happy ending, even if it wasn't herself.

It was hard to speak around the lump in her throat. "Please, Souta. One more try."

"Kagome…"

"Please."

She could see his resolve crumble as his shoulders slumped in defeat. "Fine," he said before straightening up. "But I'm coming with you to make sure you don't break your damn leg again."

Kagome didn't even have the patience to smile at him but returned to her packing. Within minutes she felt ready to go.

"Right," she said standing up. "Let's go give this another shot."

They made their way out of the house and into the sleeping night. It was nearly one in the morning when Kagome finally opened the door to the well house and walked down those familiar stairs again. At the bottom the well yawned wide, inviting her in.

Her stomach was flip-flopping like a fish out of water, but Kagome shoved that aside. Now was no time to be hesitating! Taking a deep breath, she swung a leg over the lip.

"Wait!"

Kagome turned to look at her brother. "What, Souta?"

Souta looked pained, as though he were as nervous as she. He gulped. "Just…" he started. "Just…"

Kagome waited. "What?" she said, finally.

"Just be careful when you get there," Souta blurted.

Like a weight lifting from her heart, Kagome could suddenly breathe again. She gave her brother a soft smile. "I will, Souta. Arigatou."

Gathering her courage, Kagome turned back to the darkness beneath her. Below her feet, her future rolled out, long and inviting, promising something new.

Kagome jumped.

Tales from the House of the Moon
by
Resmiranda

Chapter Four

"The only cure for grief is action." -- George Henry Lewes

* * *

Sesshoumaru hung in the giddy space between denial and grief and watched his hair swirl in the salt water that cradled him. It was almost hypnotic, and it distracted him from the fact that his clothes would be ruined as soon as he washed up on shore. It also distracted him from the fact that Rin was dead, but Sesshoumaru decided he didn't really mind that. Somehow his thoughts kept sliding away from the knowledge, not allowing him to pick it up and study it, to turn it over and digest it.

Well, that was just fine with him. If he dwelled on it, he would just end up sinking to the bottom of the water, and then no one would feel his wrath. That simply wouldn't do. So, Sesshoumaru thought to himself, the detached feeling still wrapped around his mind, what is step one for getting out of the ocean?

In his daze, he'd already drifted farther out to sea than he'd ever thought possible – the land wasn't even visible, and only his strength kept him above the waves. Everything conspired to weigh him down: his armor, his hair, his

thick clothing, the chains... If he'd been a human being, or even a lesser youkai, he would have been meat for the fishes hours ago.

...like Rin is food for worms...

The traitorous thought crept across his mind, slinking through dark shadows into which he did not want to gaze. As though he were standing atop a high tower, Sesshoumaru felt his happy detachment shudder beneath a blow of horrifying emotion that he didn't want to endure.

Shut up, he told himself. He didn't have time to think about that. He had to think about getting out of these damn chains with which his former allies had bound him. They said the chains were forged by a black miko, but Sesshoumaru had a hard time believing that. The purity in them was nothing like the purity that had surrounded him at Mount Hakurei, and if he could move around in that horrible atmosphere these chains, though they seared his skin, were no match for him. If he tried hard enough, they'd probably break.

Step two was to get rid of his pelt. It was so heavy and waterlogged that he was wondering how he'd stayed afloat so far, and there was a twinge in his chest when he thought of letting it go once the chains were broken, but Sesshoumaru shoved that aside. No time to be sentimental about it, even if it was his only reminder of his father that he had left to him.

They'd taken his swords. Toukijin and Tenseiga were now in the hands of Hatore, who had apparently been powerful enough, despite his aversion to needless violence, to wrest the reigns of leadership from all the other scum-eating traitors with which he had apparently surrounded himself.

Sesshoumaru didn't know what was worse – that he had been betrayed so easily, or that he had been blind enough to let such base and corrupt beings into his confidence. Not that he had held much choice in the matter; his father had been allies with them, and so it seemed only wise to continue alliances

that were to his benefit. It was almost inconceivable to him that anyone would consider him weak, but apparently he was. If he were not weak, he would not have allowed himself and his household to be treated this way. If he were strong, he would have fought. If he were strong, Rin's death would have not bothered him. If he were strong, she would have remained dead, he would never have given in to that horrible weakness which tugged his heart, would never have thought of a human girl as anything other than another obstacle, would have never grown accustomed to her, would never have been so stupid, would have could have should have...

In the distant tower of his mind, Sesshoumaru shuddered.

If he were strong, he would have killed her himself.

A tendril of anger and hatred curled up and around him, and suddenly he was closer than ever, emotion threatening to strangle him in the water.

He should have been strong. Instead, he was weak. Weaker than Inuyasha. Weaker than any human. He was nothing, nothing at all, all his power gone, like blood washed away on a river, like so much smoke on the wind, like the fading scent of a dead girl –

Without warning, a particularly large wave interrupted this line of thought and Sesshoumaru felt himself tipping over and under. For a brief moment, all he could see was the cold blackness beneath him, and the long, grasping strands of his shining silver hair glowing against the inky depths. The darkness in front of him looked so inviting, so cool and calm that he almost sank further, but a thoughtless inhalation quickly reasserted his instincts and he righted himself again. No, he thought. He couldn't allow himself to think like this, and he was suddenly far away again, inside his tower, away from the beating of his heart.

Now was the time for rational thought, not indulgent trips of self-pity.

Coughing up salt water, Sesshoumaru determined that a reassessment of the situation was in order.

Swords: none, he thought. Nothing but his claws. That was probably all right; there had been a time when he had no swords at all and he'd seemed to fare quite well. Allies: none. Also fine. With allies like his old ones, he didn't need enemies. Power: none. That would have to be rectified. Even though he was now apparently in exile in the middle of the open sea, eventually he'd hit land again where he was still a force to be reckoned with. Servants: none. Fine. He'd done just fine without servants for years. The fact that he had none to make demands or annoy him should be a bonus, but unfortunately it didn't feel like one. Just another thing he'd have to avoid thinking about, he supposed.

Rins: none.

Another lash of horror whipped around him, but Sesshoumaru shook it off. Shaking it off seemed to be getting easier with practice, he reflected. Soon he wouldn't have to think about her at all. Now, what else?

Annoying chains: one. The salt water was starting to really sting where the cold, pure metal burned at his skin, and Sesshoumaru found he liked the physical pain. It took his mind off other things that seemed too pressing or too weighty for him to consider, such as his situation.

There was no time like the present to free himself, so Sesshoumaru closed his eyes and concentrated his considerable power in his limbs. Beneath his skin and over his bones he could feel his muscles slide and tense, moving over one another with silky fluidity as he prepared for the outburst of strength that would – hopefully – break the shackles that burned and weighed him down.

Tense, and then, quickly – he thought half-coherently. A short, sharp cry – his – reached his ears as he let himself release his power in one swift movement,

and then the chains, broken, were sinking to floor of the silent sea and he could move freely again.

Sesshoumaru marveled with a cold indifference that it had been quite easy to break free, but if he concentrated he could still detect his body flowing with an almost inexhaustible supply of adrenaline. Even enchanted bindings couldn't hold him. The adrenaline was a nice touch though; he wouldn't tire for a while yet, even though he had been floating for half a day and the sun was setting again. Funny, but he couldn't remember it shining.

The next thing to slowly drift to the depths was the pelt. It was just a burden. Next was his armor. He could always get more of that. His clothes were heavy and wet but he could endure them now that all the weighty metal was sinking ponderously beneath the hungry waves.

With care, Sesshoumaru turned in the water, letting his unerring instincts guide him. He'd been drifting southwest for a while now, but he was probably not so far south that he wouldn't hit land if he went east. He didn't stop to think what waited him on land. Ignominy and defeat were abstract things, whereas the fear that he would fall forever into the bottomless sea was very real. Whatever was on land could wait.

Slowly but deliberately, the exiled demon prince of the Moonlit Country leveled himself in the water and began to swim for land.

* * *

He'd swam for hours through the black waters of the sea, and even when land was in sight he found that he was unable to feel anything but exhaustion. Even when he dragged himself onto the beach beneath the mocking light of the moon, he felt nothing but a hollow ache inside. He felt so weightless beneath

his heavy skin it was a wonder he had to work to stay afloat, but that thought was only a passing wisp of contemplation; any thoughts were merely things to pass the time as he crawled up the beach – one hand, one stump of a wrist, over and over – and into the forest, ignoring his screaming muscles and burning lungs.

There was a village nearby, but it was a trivial matter to the overwhelming need for sleep. Every nerve in his body clamored for respite, but Sesshoumaru refused to give in until he was well inside the forest and the tickling scent of cooking fires –

– fire, burning, falling timbers, blood, blood, blood –

– was as hidden by the lush scent of the forest as it was going to be for the time being.

Carefully, without bothering to strip himself of his waterlogged clothing, he propped his battered body against a tree and let his eyes slide closed, and sleep came up to claim him.

It seemed only moments later he awoke with a start, but the sun was high in the sky indicating that he had been sleeping for twelve hours or more. Parts of his clothing were dry but scratchy, though where they touched the trunk of the tree or the ground they were still damp. Puzzled, the demon cast about for what had awoken him from such badly needed sleep when he heard it.

In the bushes there was a rustle. On the breeze, his sharp nose picked up the scent of a human being. A small one.

Dimly, he wondered what he had done to deserve this cruel, ironic turn of the wheel as a small, girlish face slowly inched over the leaves of the bush in which she was hiding.

Don't look at me, he thought. Don't look at me.

She didn't stop until her eyes peeked over the edge. It was almost too much to bear. In the infinite moment as her wide brown eyes locked on his golden ones, Sesshoumaru felt a strange sensation that he had not known since he was very small.

He wanted to cry.

He was falling down a long tunnel and there was no end in sight. She would walk toward him, try to save him, need his protection, and he would never be free ever again, she was dead already, even as he watched her, she was small and human and weak and she was going to die –

And then she shrieked, a sound of pure fear, and then the sound of pounding feet met his ears as the little girl ran as fast as she could toward her village.

Apparently the tunnel was a deep well, and Sesshoumaru suddenly felt as though he had landed, very hard, at the bottom of it. Curiously, though the breath was knocked out of him, he felt both spared and deprived at the same time. Angrily he pushed those feelings away and slowly rose. He wasn't entirely rested yet, but he had to leave. The girl would bring trouble in the form of more humans and for once he didn't feel like killing them. Or perhaps he felt too much like killing them. Either way, he didn't have the energy to deal with it.

And it didn't matter where he went, anyway. It didn't matter if he killed them or if he didn't. It didn't matter at all.

Resolutely, the demon turned and made his way north and to the east, away

from his ancestral lands and all the crowded memories and all of the nothingness that waited for him there.

* * *

When Kagome felt the magic catch, she laughed with fear and joy at the familiar sensation. It felt like a hand had grabbed her by the stomach and pulled her downward, into the shining depths of the streams of time that expanded all around her. It was exhilarating and seemed to go on forever, though in reality it was only a brief moment until she felt the familiar thump as she landed at the bottom of the well.

The scent of the city was gone – the ones she was never aware of even existing until the sudden and abrupt change of venue to another time – and the air inside the well was newer somehow. It was dank and filled with the bouquet of the dark and damp, but it was alive, and above her the gauze of stars that stretched over the canopy of the night shone serenely like they never did in her time.

For nearly a minute, Kagome, aspiring archaeologist, college student, and one-time adventurer, knelt, stupefied, at the bottom of a rank old well in the Sengoku Jidai until she slashed through the fear that had suddenly settled in her stomach. She was going to see her friends again, and that was enough, wasn't it? Her dear friends, who had traveled with her through fire and brimstone, and her first love, Inuyasha – well, Inuyasha and Kikyou would be married, but they might have children, and she would be... would be... aunt Kagome...

Kagome nearly gagged before getting a grip on herself. No! she told herself fiercely in the fearful silence of her mind, Kaede told me to accept my fate, or I would never be happy. If the well has welcomed me back, I must have a purpose here. Resolved, she stood and began the irritating climb up the vines

to the outside world.

It was dark, but it didn't feel late. That was the first thought that hit her mind as she steadied herself on her feet. The second was that she could smell cooking fires on the soft breeze from Edo, as though it were only an hour past sunset.

Well, that wasn't really too different from the way things seemed to work when she was going in and out of the well for months at a time when she was still in junior high and high school. It didn't seem terribly amiss that the seasons would be slightly different in the Sengoku Jidai than in her own time. Kagome slowly began the short walk to Edo beneath the stars.

The walk was shorter than she remembered, partly because the village had grown so much. At the outskirts were well built houses and inside each, in the flickering yellow light of the cooking fire, there was talk and laughter. So different from when she had last been there, when starvation constantly threatened, and when demon attacks kept the village quiet.

Could I really have only been gone for a few years? she wondered fondly.

Kaede's hut was no longer on the edge of the village. It seemed to be well into it now, but Kagome would have recognized it anywhere; the pockmarked old timbers and the straw door were the same. It had a new roof, but that wasn't anything special. Cautiously, Kagome stepped up to the entrance and paused, uncertain how to proceed.

What would Kaede say? Would she be happy or surprised? Maybe she would be angry with her for coming back to a time that so clearly wasn't hers...

No, Kaede would never be angry with me for that. Kagome reached up and knocked on the wooden door frame.

Inside there was a rustling, and a voice she didn't know called out, "Enter!"

Kagome hesitated for only a moment before pushing aside the straw flap and stepping inside, but what she saw caused her to stop in confusion.

In front of her was a woman of middle age, wearing traditional miko garb, but it was definitely not Kaede. There was a pot of stew bubbling over a fire, and the woman was looking at her with suspicion as she opened her mouth to speak.

"I am Sinayo, this village's priestess," she said slowly. "Who are you?"

Kagome stared at her. She was probably in her forties or maybe early fifties, hair streaked with grey, and beside her was a bow and a discarded quiver. Her hands were resting in her lap but Kagome had the distinct impression that she could have that bow up and ready before Kagome could even turn to run. Somehow, Kagome couldn't even get her mouth to work to tell her who she was.

The hands in Sinayo's lap tensed. "I'll ask you again, stranger, who are you?"

Confusion reigned. Kagome licked her lips. "Where's Kaede?" she asked dumbly.

The miko in front of her narrowed her eyes and grasped the bow next to her, using as a crutch to stand. "How do you know that name?" she demanded. "Who sent you?"

"No one! Where – what happened to Kaede?" Please don't let her be dead! I

was only gone six years!

The miko gave her an appraising look. "You're dressed strangely, but I don't detect any youki around you. You're not a demon?"

Mutely, Kagome shook her head.

"Then how do you know Kaede's name?"

Relief flooded her and Kagome sagged against the doorframe, her gaze dropping to the floor as her breath came easier. "Then you do know Kaede?" Kagome asked eagerly between cleansing draughts of air. "We were friends a few years ago, and if you could just tell me where she is I'll go away and leave you – "

The sound of scraping caused her to look up into the sights of an arrow.

"You can't have known her," Sinayo said levelly, her face hard and determined. "You are too young."

Small alarm bells were suddenly ringing in Kagome's head, echoing through her mind. "What – what do you mean?" she asked hesitantly.

"Kaede died years ago. You could not have known her if you are not a demon."

Years...?

There was no strength in her legs. The wood of the doorframe caught her sleeve as she slid toward the smooth, sanded floorboards. "No..." she breathed.

"No, that's not possible."

"I assure you it is," said the miko as she lowered her bow, obviously determining that a fainting young woman was probably no threat. She took several steps before stopping a few feet away.

Kagome's stomach was curling around in knots, sliding in slippery, acid waves, and her vision was blurring in a funny way.

"What about – what about Inuyasha?" she finally asked. "Where is he?"

The dizzying, dancing vision of the miko before her looked even more annoyed, if that was possible. "Who are you?" she demanded a third time.

Kagome's mouth was dry. She ran her tongue around the inside, over the roof and the teeth, tasting only cotton and bile. "Kagome," she finally whispered. "I'm Kagome."

The bow slipped from Sinayo's fingers. When it hit the floor, it clattered loudly in the silence of the hut. "The miko?" she said distantly.

Kagome nodded.

"Kagome-sama, is it really you?"

Her vision was going crazy – everything was blurring and weaving in front of her. Sinayo suddenly looked concerned and awed as she closed the gap between them and knelt in front of her. She stretched out a hand, as though to touch her, but Kagome shied away and tried to nod, though the movement only caused nausea. At the cold and distant edges of her mind there was a

chilly knowledge, but she didn't want to touch it. "Please," she said again. "Where is Inuyasha?"

Sinayo looked stricken. "Kagome-sama..." she said again, and, ridiculously, Kagome was reminded of her little brother. Blindly she reached out and grabbed the sleeve of the older woman, every line of her body begging, seeking.

"Where is he?"

The miko would not meet her eyes. "I'm sorry, Kagome-sama. You've been gone for over forty years. Inuyasha... he died. He and Kikyou. Two years after you left. I'm sorry."

I'm sorry... I'm sorry... I'm sorry... dead, died, for years, dead sorry gone sorry...

The world splashed around her, and Kagome leapt up in a daze and fled, not stopping when she heard her name called, not stopping until she was at the edge of the forest – Inuyasha's forest, dead, sorry, dead Inuyasha's forest – where she threw herself to her hands and knees, eyes streaming with tears, and vomited.

Even as she heaved into the lush leaves, she could hear voices behind her. Her backpack felt so heavy and she was hot and cold all over.

I can't stay here. I can't be here any longer. This can't be possible. I'll go back to my own time and when I come back, it'll all be okay.

Wiping her mouth, she stumbled to her feet and ran toward the well, trees ripping her clothes and the tears still blinding her. Her lungs and throat burned, but the pain was nothing to what was in her heart, and she ran and

ran and ran.

When they found her, she was sobbing at the bottom of the well, trying to dig her way to the future, to the past where none of this had happened, to the time when she had been happy.

But the well was silent and impassive, and refused to let her return.

Tales from the House of the Moon
by
Resmiranda

Chapter Five

"Razors pain you, rivers are damp,
Acid stains you, and drugs cause cramps.
Guns aren't lawful, nooses give,
Gas smells awful – you might as well live." --Dorothy Parker, Résumé

* * *

Good old ceiling, Kagome thought. I always know where I stand with you.

It was a good ceiling. The heavy, seasoned rafters that supported the thatched roof were solidly in place and appeared to be just as stable and dependable as the first night she slept beneath this roof, that night so many years ago after she had unleashed the monster Inuyasha from the tree and he had tried to kill her. It had taken so much and so little to free him from his bondage – just a quick tug and a sudden holy vaporization and the monster was loose, crude and brash, destroying her life, her peace of mind, the tranquil girlish idealism

of her heart.

God, how she missed him.

After the first initial shock, Kagome realized that she had been harboring the terrible, debilitating wish to see him again in her breast. That wish had kept her leaping through the broken well again and again; it had ruined her little rebound relationship with Hojou, had made her sleepy with sadness, had driven her to her chosen field of study. Everything she had done in her life had revolved around the idea that if she was smart enough, or strong enough, or oh, so good she would see him again. Now her wish had been granted; now she was in the past again, except that it was a different past. Her enemies were gone, but so were her friends. And now the well would not let her back through to her own time.

Kagome reflected that it was bitterly ironic that she had lived her life in the past, and now that she wanted to return to where she belonged and pick up the pieces of her mockery of a half-life she was not allowed to do so. Perhaps it's my destiny to be disappointed at every turn, she thought miserably as she glared into the gloom at the top of the hut and reflected on the events that had led her there.

It was fetid at the bottom of that hole, and Kagome needed very little convincing to lever herself back onto her feet, wipe her eyes, and determine to cry later where no one could see. She'd probably made a huge fool of herself; the torches shone shivering light down into the shaft to reveal her form at the bottom, crying for what appeared to be no reason; combined with the vomit and the mud, she was certainly not winning any beauty contests either. Mustering what was left of her dignity, she'd climbed out of the well on her own and would have taken care of things on her own but Sinayo had insisted she be helped by several of the young men of the village down to the stream to clean herself up and then back to her hut.

Kagome had done so in an obedient daze, at least until she discovered that one of her escorts, a strapping lad just into manhood, had wandering hands. It had reminded her so much of a certain monk she used to know that Kagome burst into tears all over again. Mortified, the young man tried to apologize, but she had only cried harder until Sinayo appeared, assessed the situation, and soundly smacked the offender with her bow. Probably things would have gone

very badly for him just then if Kagome hadn't gained control of her vocal cords in the nick of time to assure the older miko that she wasn't offended.

It was depressing. Had she really become so insensible that sexual harassment made her nostalgic? She knew they were dead, in her time; why was she still so miserable? Sighing, her breath shuddering just a little in her chest from remembered tears, Kagome pulled her blanket over her face and tried to shut out the tiny, grieving thoughts that plucked at her mind. The futile gesture and the knowledge of its genesis almost made her laugh.

As if anything she could do would make a difference.

That attitude seemed to be what got her into trouble the whole time she was traipsing about in the Sengoku Jidai; she could help, she could do something right, she could handle the crisis as long as no one noticed her, defenseless, on the sidelines. Running away, that's what she was meant to do. Run away and detect shards and make sure she didn't die, because finding shards would be that much harder. She hadn't even been much use when Naraku was finally defeated; the only thing she had been good for was making a pure wish – a wish to make other people happy at her own expense. She loved Inuyasha, but to make him happy she would have done anything, even if it meant her own sadness, and so she paid in sacrifice and bought redemption and the hanyou was human and the woman he loved, who had died so tragically, was restored to him. It was worth it.

Except now she had to learn that the happiness she bought with her own tears was gone, buried in the earth, stricken down in the prime of life, Sinayo said, by sickness.

In the end, the second son of the demon lord of the west and his kind bride, the former protector of the Shikon no Tama, had both died of what amounted to a bad case of the flu, and Kagome, the miko reborn, tried not to think about how many flu shots she had received.

It was fate, Sinayo had told her, softly, sadly.

"Fate is cruel," Kagome had said. Sinayo had only nodded.

So many questions, and none of them with satisfactory answers.

Where is Shippou?

The kitsune left after Inuyasha and Kikyou died, was the reply.

Where were Sango and Miroku?

Gone, Sinayo answered, no one had heard of them since before Inuyasha died.

How do you know my name?

I remember you, from when I was a little girl.

"You remember me?" Kagome had asked.

"You and Inuyasha were the champions of our village," Sinayo had replied. "I wanted to be a miko, just like you. You were good and kind and noble and brave, and I thought... I had hoped... What I mean is, I don't have a lot of power, but..." she trailed off. "I do my best. I hope you find me worthy of taking your place."

Then, to Kagome's astonishment, the woman – Sinayo, old enough to be her mother, her eyes full of wisdom, but her voice echoing with childlike idolatry – had bowed deep and low. "My replacement?" Kagome had said, dumbly. Her mind, still reeling from cold, slippery grief, seemed to waver at the impact of such a notion.

"Hai, Kagome-sama," Sinayo replied, and hearing the words, spoken so reverently, Kagome felt something inside her twist around itself, painfully.

She bowed her head. "I was never a very good miko to begin with," she said softly, and between them a silence grew, broken only by the crackling of the fire and the hollow years that separated them.

This must be what it means to be a demon; this must be what it means to be one who lives forever, she had thought as the fire sparked and the emptiness of the world mutely howled outside the door. I'm not good or noble. I'm not brave. I'm just scared. I was always just scared, just trying to do the right thing. Sometimes I wouldn't think, or would do something stupid, but I was still

afraid.

Now, staring at the ceiling, Kagome wanted to cry again as she went over the conversation in her mind. I wasn't a very good miko at all. I was just a kid. The truth hovered outside her mind.

I still feel like a kid.

The miko reborn stared into the darkness. The darkness stared back. She was still afraid, and Kagome wished for Inuyasha, for her friends to knock on the door, to be surrounded by them. Safe, and known. Known.

This is what it means to be immortal. The thought flashed and sparked across her mind, white with the incandescence of realization. Always remembered, but no one knows. No one but me will ever know what it was like. They may remember the deeds and the stories, the myth of the hanyou prince and his priestess companion. They may recall the huntress and the monk and the fox. But none of them remember what it was like. None of them know who these heroes really were. They don't know that the hanyou had a weakness for noodles, or that the huntress loved the color green, or that the monk used to crack his fingers when he was nervous. They know nothing of the people, only the story. In the thick, heavy quiet of the night, wrapped in borrowed blankets, Kagome could hear the crystalline sound of her breaking heart. I am the only one who remembers them...

I will always be alone.

* * *

When Kagome awoke the next morning to the gentle hand of Sinayo on her shoulder, she was heartsick, stricken with a headache, and her eyes were gummy and crusted with dried tears. She must have been crying in her sleep.

"Ungh," was her first word as she scrubbed the disgusting detritus of her despair from her eyes when she sat up.

Sinayo, kneeling next to her, sat back in slight surprise.

For some reason the action irritated her. Never seen a living legend wake up before? Kagome thought moodily and then immediately felt guilty. Sinayo had been nothing but solicitous and caring.

"Would you like some breakfast?" the older miko asked, unwittingly adding another stab of guilt to Kagome's already pin-cushioned stomach. She nodded slowly and rubbed her temples as Sinayo rose and began to fill two bowls with cold rice and a little bit of fish.

"Thank you very much," Kagome murmured as she accepted the bowl and settled down across from – strange as it might seem – her successor, and began the arduous process of chewing and swallowing.

Kagome had never been drunk before, but this, she imagined, was what a hangover felt like. Her thoughts were jumbled and angry inside her skull, and her recollections of the night before were dull and painful. It hurt to probe too much. But nothing could hide the fact that she was alone in the past once more, her way home seemed blocked, and all her friends were gone.

She had to find some way home; that old panic that she had felt many times while searching for shards – that she would never find any, and she would be stuck in the past forever – was beginning to settle in. Before she could grieve or scream or just curl into a little ball, she had to find some way to open the well again. Midterms were in a few weeks, after all.

Kagome glanced up at Sinayo, wondering if she might know how to open the well again, and caught the older miko nearly nodding off into her rice.

"Are you feeling well?" Kagome asked, her innate concern for others suddenly reasserting itself, even though what she really wanted was for someone to ask how she was doing for a change.

Starting, Sinayo sat straight up and blinked several times. "Pardon me, Kagome-sama, but I was up very early this morning. Hachiro-kun sequestered himself in a tree and wouldn't come down until I assured him that the miko from the future was not going to harm him."

Kagome quirked an eyebrow.

"You're, ah, suitor from last night," Sinayo supplied.

"Ah," Kagome said.

There was a pregnant pause. Kagome could hear the next question before it was spoken.

"You... wouldn't hurt him, would you?" Sinayo asked as delicately as possible.

Kagome shook her head. "Of course not," she replied, but she caught the noticeable relaxation of tension in Sinayo's shoulders.

She fears me, Kagome thought, and she didn't know whether to feel hurt or empowered.

"I hope he's okay." She was offering platitudes instead of her real thoughts, but her real thoughts were so uncharitable and crowded that it would be cruel to try to voice them. Kagome looked down into her bowl.

"He'll be fine," Sinayo sniffed. "He never was the brightest boy."

"Hm," Kagome said noncommittally, and slowly finished her breakfast. She felt a little bit better after her stomach had time to settle around the rice. Sinayo held out a hand to collect her bowl.

"Do you know how to open the well?" Kagome asked, surprising herself with the words that tumbled out of her mouth without any prior thought. There I go again, jumping into the situation.

For her part, Sinayo looked surprised. "No, I do not," she answered readily, "but I have been thinking about your predicament."

Now it was Kagome's turn to look surprised. Someone had been thinking about her problems? That was a nice turnabout, even if it did make her feel like she was suddenly imposing upon the older miko, who continued without seeming to notice the expression of slight shock Kagome wore.

"To the north there is a miko who is very, very powerful. Her name is Hotaru-sama, and she is very knowledgeable about magic and such. I myself

was never good at the kind of concentration required to summon the spiritual power that was needed, but I think Hotaru-sama might be able to help you."

"The North?" Kagome said, feeling as though she had only digested a third of the words in Sinayo's proposition.

"Hai. She lives on the coast."

"And you think she'll be able to help me?"

Sinayo dipped her head with a small smile. "She should be the first person to ask. If not her, I'm sure she might know someone else who could help you."

Kagome was slightly stunned; against all expectation, things seemed to be looking up. "But… how will I get there? Will you travel with me?"

For the first time since she had met the older miko, Kagome saw her laugh. "Me?" Sinayo chuckled, disbelief coloring her voice. "I could never make that sort of journey. No, I will send someone with you."

Confused, Kagome quirked a brow. "Not Hachiro, right?"

Sinayo laughed again. "No. Do not worry, Kagome-sama. I shall see that you are well looked-after."

The heavy mantel of impotence suddenly seemed to be lifting from her shoulders, and it was a heady feeling. Kagome knew that she was too late to save her friends, or even Rin whom was also dead and almost forgotten under the barrage of other sorrows, but now a sense of purpose was beginning to trickle into her recently hollowed heart.

"You'd do that for me?" she asked. It seemed a little too good to be true, to escape from this past that was not the past, and part of her did not want to be disappointed.

"Of course, Kagome-sama. You are a champion of our village." The other miko reached out and patted her hand. "Don't you worry about a thing."

Kagome smiled in relief. "Arigatou, Sinayo-san."

Sinayo smiled back, and through the cracks around her door, the dawn began to spill in.

* * *

Rin woke him, as she did every morning. He could smell her before his eyes opened, advancing into his room to scratch his ears and laugh the girlish laugh that was not quite the joy of a child nor the mirth of a woman.

He always remembered, as he made the arduous, unwelcome journey to consciousness, that he wasn't in a room. He was usually propped against a tree trunk or in a cave, but even as the textures around him became sharp and recognizable, Rin was there, laughing that horrible laugh that hadn't changed for over thirty years. She would never change because she was dead, and he wondered if her memory would ever stop tickling his soul like a phantom limb.

It seemed ironic that his own limbs were once again whole, but his spirit seemed carved into something that no longer resembled himself. It was ironic that he was probably strong enough to take on his enemies, but that he seemed to have no interest in doing so. It was ironic that the little girl whom he wanted to never change wouldn't ever change now; she remained static in his memory, always on the cusp of womanhood, always selfish and carefree, always seared into his memory with a life half-lived. No, not even half-lived. Barely lived.

"Awake today, milord?"

Sesshoumaru let his eyes slide down to the sleeve of his haori and found the source of his annoyance. It was only Myouga-jii, who more often than not would come and torment him. Distantly, Sesshoumaru wondered when the flea was going to die, but decided it didn't matter. At least he remained constant.

"I'm always awake when you are here," Sesshoumaru replied.

Myouga just chuckled. "Most of the time you are quite dead to the world," he

replied. "Even when I jump up and down next to your ear and shout your name you sometimes do not stir."

"Just because I do not stir, that does not mean I do not hear you," Sesshoumaru replied. In truth he could never remember such a thing happening – was he spending more and more time in sleep? – but it never did well to advertise such an oversight.

"Sesshoumaru-sama! I am hurt, milord," the flea said, although he did not sound particularly wounded. Sesshoumaru did not acknowledge this statement. It did not seem to require any response in any case, and Myouga began to prattle about affairs in the West, merrily slicing the heart of his liege to ribbons. Sesshoumaru never wanted to hear about the West, his inconstant allies, his ruined home ever again. For nearly ten years he had sought a new sword, a new set of armor, had fought his foes on the borders of what was once his land, but without allies it was nearly impossible to overcome such a large collection of youkai, even when most of them were weaker than he. The truth remained that they were much, much stronger when banded together. After a while, it seemed pointless. What was he fighting for, anyway? The burnt ruins of the House of the Moon? The lost heirlooms of his father that he was no longer fit to wield? Honor? Revenge? What good were those things when he woke every day with a shining half-moon smile in his mind and went to sleep each night missing the dead?

So he wandered, looking for some inspiration to restore him to his former self. He had no honor – his enemies hadn't even felt he was worth killing, and if he were at all a man he would have honorably committed suicide long ago. No, honor meant little any more. His pride had long ago been shredded to bits. Such a selfish thing seemed paltry against the death he had witnessed in the House of the Moon. There was no pride, no honor, no vengeance. Vengeance could not raise the dead.

Slowly, Sesshoumaru let himself sag where he sat. He was propped against a tree today – what was today? – and the dew had settled on him. His hakama, somewhat worse for the wear, were soaked through and clung to his form, but his haori, relatively new and covered with new armor, was fairly dry. The sode covering his shoulders kept the damp from his sleeves well enough, but the long, white trails of his cuffs were drenched with dew. The morning was cold, but there didn't seem to be any point in getting up and making himself

presentable. He entertained no one but insects and insensate creatures that ventured into his clearings and none of them cared what he looked like.

Sesshoumaru felt his eyes lose focus, and Myouga's chattering faded into the dull background roar of his mind. Rest beckoned him. He was so tired. Why am I so weary? he wondered, but it didn't matter; creeping up to claim him was a feeling of pleasant numbness, and Sesshoumaru welcomed it.

He was in danger of slipping into the nothingness that he craved when he felt a sharp prick on his cheek that brought him suddenly back to reality.

Reaching up, he plucked the flea from his face and held him in front of his eyes.

"I told you not to do that," he said mechanically. Pinched between his forefinger and thumb, Myouga began to struggle.

"You are losing it, Sesshoumaru-sama! You sit there for hours staring at nothing, and you won't respond to any sort of noise or touch! Why? Why have you not restored your father's honor? Why do you still wander?" he cried, multiple limbs struggling to break free of the hold of Sesshoumaru's claws.

For a long moment it seemed that the youkai prince would not respond, until he slowly opened his mouth.

"Why...?" Sesshoumaru repeated. He didn't know why. His father's honor was so far removed from his situation that there seemed an enormous rift, black and howling with danger, between him and the memory of his sire.

Myouga's arms and legs drooped. "You appear to be stricken with an affliction, my lord," he said quietly.

Sesshoumaru said nothing, and waited.

Myouga seemed hesitant to continue, but finally he spoke again. "There is... I have heard of a miko whose power is able to be felt nearly a mile away, and she has been traveling these past few weeks toward the north. She has been... helping people – humans and demons alike – as she travels."

The old retainer trailed off, and Sesshoumaru set him down on his sleeve.

"And?" he asked.

Shrugging, the flea looked up at the face of his lord. "And she might be able to help you."

"Help me?"

"Hai."

Sesshoumaru said nothing, only raised his head and inhaled deeply. In the trees, the cool, sweet breeze rustled.

He could smell plum blossoms on the wind. It was going to be a beautiful day.

* * *

Sitting in front of the fire, Kagome stared moodily into the flames.

Her guide had turned out to be a lithe young woman by the name of Amaya whose every gesture was so agonizingly reminiscent of Sango that Kagome could not decide whether to distance herself entirely or to attempt to become fast friends. After the initial introduction, Kagome struggled until her innate sense of camaraderie won, but it turned out that she shouldn't have really bothered; Amaya was skittish around the miko from the future, so after a week or so of friendly overtures Kagome gave up. Being a legend in her own lifetime had some serious downsides.

They had been walking for weeks. Sometimes, Amaya would accidentally take the wrong turn despite her insistence that she had impeccable direction. Other times they would run across a village, and Kagome, dressed as she was in a borrowed miko's outfit, would often be hailed and her assistance requested. She was beginning to regret taking the garb of a priestess, but the baggage it came with seemed so insignificant now. No one remembered what Kikyou looked like; no one would be comparing the two of them. Besides, the nights were cold, and the thick hakama, while more restrictive than her own clothing, were less indecent for the times.

What really shocked her was the lack of youkai they ran into. The borrowed bow slung across her back gave her a measure of peace, but what really set her mind at ease was the seeming dearth of demons attacking her. Perhaps it was because she no longer carried Shikon shards around her neck, or maybe the youkai had pulled away from human settlements; either way, there were less of them. In fact, she'd run into only two of them on the road, and both of them had been harmless and injured. The second one was a horse youkai with a shallow gash in his side, and Kagome had patched him up in a field full of flowers and wondered how Jinenji was doing, or even if he was still alive. That had tugged at her heart a little bit, but not as much as the first youkai had.

The first one had been a tiny fox kit on the side of the road, younger than Shippou was as she remembered him. The little fox-girl had a sprained ankle, and Kagome, unable to resist the large, silent tears that fell from the little kitsune's wide green eyes, bandaged her foot, ignoring the warnings of Amaya.

"Kagome-sama! Kitsunes are tricksters! She's only trying to trick you!" the guide shouted from the opposite side of the road.

"Well, she's doing a really good job!" Kagome yelled back as her knowing fingers probed the swollen flesh around the furry ankle. The little kit cried harder.

"It's dangerous, Kagome-sama!"

Kagome ignored Amaya's warnings and reached inside her pack. After a few moments she found her first aid kit, drew it out, and opened it up. As she rummaged around inside it, she took the opportunity to speak to the kitsune.

"You don't have to be afraid," she said kindly. "I'm going to help you."

The little kit just sniffled.

Smiling, Kagome showed her the roll of bandages. "I'm going to wrap your foot so you can walk." The kit didn't answer. Seeking to put her at her ease, Kagome began to chatter softly as she carefully bound the foot, asking her name and where she lived. By the end of the little one-sided conversation, the kit had stopped crying and was staring at her with wide eyes.

"All done!" Kagome declared, clapping her hands. "If it swells up any more, go stick your foot in a mountain stream. It will be cold, but it will help."

The little kit nodded, and Kagome stood, picking up her large yellow pack and moving to the center of the road again. After about ten paces, Amaya joined her.

"Kagome-sama, I have never seen anything like that!"

Kagome was puzzled. "Like what?"

Amaya waved a hand in the air, as though at a loss. "I've never seen a priestess take care of a youkai."

And that was the crux of it, really. She, who had spent so much time in the comforting presence of a hanyou and a kitsune, who had once been the favored maiden of a wolf prince, was suddenly strange and out of water. Youkai were to be feared or ignored, as always, but no one familiar with them would have ever thought the little fox-child would be any threat at all.

There was no youki around her, and Kagome found it strange. Where were all the youkai?

"Mostly dead," Amaya had replied when she asked. "The East doesn't really take very kindly to youkai anymore."

"Oh," Kagome had said, because there didn't seem to be much she could say to that.

Now Amaya and Kagome were sitting by a small fire, and above them the astonishing stars twinkled and danced. If stars had voices, they would be laughing at me, Kagome thought.

"How long until we find Hotaru-sama?" she wondered as she poked the fire with a long branch.

Amaya shrugged. "A few more days, probably," she said nonchalantly.

Midterms are over, Kagome thought. All those midterms she would have aced were now forever gone in the long walk from the flourishing Edo to the unknown North. Maybe I shouldn't have spent so much time taking care of other people. Maybe I should have taken care of my own business.

It was a useless thought, though, and Kagome found she did not regret her time spent bandaging villagers and youkai. Sighing, she reached inside her backpack and drew out the books she had stowed away for studying, just as though she were back in high school and trying to pass algebra.

Beneath the stars and the moon, Kagome sifted through her texts. Art of Ancient Japan, Life in the Kamakura Period, and Feudal Costumes were shuffled in her hands until she came up with what she wanted: her notebook detailing the myths and legends of Japan. Amaya ignored her nervous movements and stoked the fire. Kagome was grateful for the other girl's reticence; she could torment herself in peace.

Kagome looked down at the notebook in her hands; she always brought it out at night and tortured herself with it. Like her own memory, it served as a painful reminder of the things she had been unable to do and of her own mission, miserably failed. With weak fingers, she turned to the legend of Sesshoumaru and Rin and began to reread her notes.

For fifty years the demon lord wandered in the East. It was right there in front of her, this story of betrayal and grief, and though she would never have admitted it to anyone in this time period, it irked her that she had not even managed to land fifty years after the first part of the legend when Sesshoumaru reclaimed his land. There was nothing she could do to help. The unnamed miko, possibly Hotaru-sama herself, would be there in the decades that waited, but Kagome was never even a part of it, just like the legend of Inuyasha that had been lost to the ages.

She was lost to the ages as well; she had saved the world and was now caught in obscurity, unknown and unknowable, even to the people who thought they knew her.

In the firelight, the waning moons she had scribbled on the pages seemed to dance and dip, and Kagome felt frustrated tears stinging high in her nose. Useless again.

To her right, Amaya suddenly shifted and Kagome looked up.

"What is it, Amay – " she began.

"Shh!" the other girl hissed urgently. Kagome shut her mouth. Amaya was not lounging against her own pack now; she was crouched, with a knife drawn, and every line of her body, from the cave of her chest to the arch of her back spoke volumes to Kagome, who had seen Inuyasha adopt this stance so many times before.

Something was out there.

"Can you feel that?" Amaya whispered.

Kagome concentrated, and was suddenly bowled over, her hands gripping the earth beneath her.

Somewhere, outside the circle of firelight, was a demon.

Its presence was powerful, nearly overwhelming, and her breath was catching in her chest. She hadn't felt such energy in so long that it was almost incapacitating in its intensity and focus.

"Oh," she whispered, suddenly feeling very small and alone. The fire was now a hindrance, blinding her to the hostile night, and even the presence of Amaya was not reassuring; it was powerful. If the demon decided to attack, neither of them would survive. Carefully, as Amaya began to move in an oblique circle, still crouching, Kagome reached behind her and put her hand on her bow, taking small comfort in its solidity. Slowly, she drew herself to her feet and retrieved an arrow, knocking it in the string and pulling it back, waiting.

A breeze rustled her hair.

I must look ridiculous, she thought. The demonic energy was curling around her, filling her heart with ice and causing the hair on her neck to stand up, and she was shaking so badly her knees were buckling and the bow quivered in her hands.

She would only get one shot. She was going to faint. The youki surrounded her, shooting painful lightning to her core, and even though it was useless the instinct to run was almost overwhelming her. Never run from a youkai, she thought. Her mind was shivering but distant, naming the things she might need to do, calmly and rationally while the rest over her tensed over and over as she prepared to flee.

Amaya was a statue. "It's watching us," she whispered fiercely.

But Kagome already knew. Through the fog of fear that surrounded her brain, she felt something vague and strange. This energy… it was almost familiar. As if she had felt it before.

I know this demon.

The insurmountable force of the youkai approaching stirred memories that she had tried so hard to be rid of, memories that she was determined not to revisit until she was alone, but now that was impossible.

Kagome felt like laughing and crying at the same time, because she understood why she was here. It was the reason the well had let her through. It was the reason she had felt compelled to return. The story had caught her in its tendrils, and she had never even guessed.

He was coming closer, and she knew him. She knew this power. It felt like thunder rattling her bones; it felt like nighttime beneath the shrouded moon. And she knew.

...and it came to pass that a miko became prominent in the North, and she was of such great power and such great compassion that even youkai who sought an end to sorrows went to her and asked her for assistance. When the lord heard of her, he immediately traveled to the North...

"Oh, no..." Kagome breathed, and lowered her bow.

Amaya shot her a look of alarm. "What are you doing?" she hissed. "It's still out there!"

Kagome did not reply.

"Kagome-sama? Kagome-sama!"

Kagome paid no attention to Amaya's frantic whispers. "Oh no, no, no," she murmured over and over again, like a mantra, and the youki that clung to her, piercingly familiar, grew stronger and stronger.

And then, there, staring at her from the edge of the firelight, looking so much the way she remembered that it was almost pain to see his untouchable face, stood Sesshoumaru. He was a figure from the past, so sharp in her memory and so blurred in the light of the fire, and he stirred something so powerfully longing, so horribly nostalgic that the world, except for the two of them, was melting away into faded insignificance. Everyone was gone, but he remained, and he had wandered for over a quarter of a century, suspended in a fairytale, just to find her.

"Miko," he said, voice resonating in the stillness of the years.

Miko. It was too much.

"Ah, shit," Kagome replied piously.

Tales from the House of the Moon
by
Resmiranda

Chapter Six

"The nearest to my heart are a king without a kingdom and a poor man who does not know how to beg." -- Khalil Gibran

* * *

I've really screwed up this time, thought Kagome as she stared at the still,

statuesque figure of Sesshoumaru. I don't know what to do. I don't know how to handle this, I don't know what to tell him, and he's going to kill me. Despite the coolness of the night, Kagome felt a thin trickle of sweat run down her spine.

Most of her mind was screaming with half-formed notions while some distant part was still listing, calmly and rationally, What To Do in Case of Youkai. Kagome ignored it, panicked imaginings ricocheting around inside her skull.

I'm not an actress, she thought, but not only am I onstage, I've completely forgotten my lines. No, I don't even know which play I'm in, and I walked onstage naked. I'm naked, I was prepared for a burlesque, and now I'm supposed to be performing kabuki and I have bronchitis. I'm naked, I have bronchitis, I'm supposed to sing opera and the yakuza are threatening to give my entire family concrete shoes if I don't bring in the crowds and give them the moneys.

He had appeared no more than twenty feet from her, his youki more unleashed than she had ever felt before, except in two instances. Either he was losing control, or he was about to become a giant dog and gulp her down like yesterday's leftover chicken. Giddily, Kagome wondered if people really tasted like chicken, or if they tasted like pork like she had always read in books. She toyed with the notion of asking him.

Sesshoumaru was still standing, half in light, half in darkness, and beside her Kagome could barely make out the panicked breath of Amaya, who seemed to be having a heart attack. The demon prince hadn't moved an inch, but knowing how quickly he could move, Kagome did not find this fact comforting.

Kagome didn't think she could deal with the suspense much longer. I'm dead. Really dead. It's not just an expression, he's going to kill me. I'm not a miko. He's fought me before. We fought together against Naraku. He came for a miko who could help him, but he knows me; he knows I was his brother's companion. He knows I'm just a hotheaded girl who once waved the Tetsusaiga in his face. I can't believe I yelled at him so many times.

I wish Inuyasha were here.

He was still just standing there, and Kagome couldn't decide if this was a good

or a bad development. Surely he recognized her. Surely he would be angry, enraged at not finding the miko he wanted. Maybe the story got it wrong – it seemed to have recorded everything else incorrectly – maybe the youkai lord killed the miko and ate her heart. There was no way to tell. She could feel her fear distorting her perception, because she thought he looked furious beneath his immobile façade. Kagome imagined he was trying to figure out where to dispose of her body. To her right there was a thud on the ground, and she could not help but turn – don't look away from your enemy, her mind supplied sensibly – to see that Amaya had sat heavily on the earth, eyes open and petrified with fear.

Even she can feel his youki. I'm dead. Almost despairingly, Kagome turned back to the still unmoving demon lord.

Kagome probably would have felt better if she knew that Sesshoumaru had yet to think any thoughts that involved skewering the girl across from him on his claws. Instead, he was trying to overcome his astonishment at not only finding his brother's companion alive, but also virtually unchanged. She smelled a little different – she had grown into a mature female in the intervening time – but other than that she remained almost the same as she had been last he saw her, over forty years ago.

Everything about her scent, from the strange dusty quality to the hint of growth teetering on the edge of decay, marked her as a wholly unremarkable human being. And yet she had not aged as a human should. Sesshoumaru could feel his pulse spike at the thought of some way to preserve a human body before he remembered that he had no need of such fanciful magic any longer. Turning his thoughts forcefully from the useless glimmer of hope, Sesshoumaru noticed that the scent of fear was tickling his nose as well.

It wasn't possible. He was mad. Too many days sitting under a tree in the hot sun had finally taken their toll on him, and he was hallucinating. That had to be it.

She was still just standing there. Sesshoumaru felt a stab of annoyance that his brain was so unimaginative; if it was going to conjure up a face from the past, the least it could do was make her a little more interesting. Maybe dress her up a little more. Yes, that would be nice.

Sesshoumaru let himself blink, hoping that she would be more intriguing when he opened his eyes again, but when he looked again she remained stock still, bow still clutched in her small white hand. Well fine, he thought sourly, be that way.

He was obviously tired. A good night's sleep would go a long way in getting rid of such a ridiculous apparition, and if his hallucination of her was just going to continue to stand there like a vaguely sentient, extremely terrified rock he probably wouldn't miss anything important if he simply left.

She was going to faint. She was breathing heavily, on the verge of hyperventilating. Not only was she afraid, but she found herself woefully unprepared with confronting what appeared to be the sole survivor of her long quest for the Shikon jewel. Beneath conflicting feelings of relief and aversion, she was ready to just scream and crawl into a hole, so when the demon suddenly moved Kagome thought her heart would shatter her chest. This is it, she thought. The moment of truth.

But instead of darting forward and ripping her throat out, Sesshoumaru merely turned around and began to retreat into the darkness of the forest.

It was an unexpected development, to say the least. Legs shaking, Kagome dumbly stared at his retreating back, watching as his silver hair tossed in the wind. She was struck with the distinct feeling that she had just missed something very important.

Right! Kagome thought. What just happened?

She blinked several times, trying to come to terms with the sudden change in the tide; she was being swept along by events she couldn't control or understand, and in her mind she wrestled with herself as she watched him. He was slowly walking away, the dappled moonlight falling down around him, and within moments he would be swallowed up by the heavy night that surrounded them.

Kagome could feel the weight of her responsibility, the crushing burden of legend bearing down as his shining figure moved ever further from her. If she really was the miko in the story and he really was the demon prince, then she should call out to him, give him good counsel, and send him on his way. If she

were truly the good and kind priestess from a distant future, she would not be afraid. She would know what to say to give him aid. If she were really the girl that had selflessly sacrificed her own dreams and happiness for the one she loved, she should be wise enough to solve the small problems of a lord who had lost a child.

But all her rationalizations and all her responsibilities meant little. As she opened her mouth and drew her breath, all Kagome could think about was the feeling of being adrift in a strange time and strange place, with no one who knew her, and no one to mourn if she died. All she could think about was the pit of loneliness yawning in her chest.

"Sesshoumaru!"

The youkai stopped. For a long moment, in which Kagome had ample time to reconsider her actions, neither of them moved. Then he turned back toward her, and walked, measured and even, through the moonlight-sprinkled trees and into the circle of warm, dancing light.

She was calming down, and when he came to a halt Kagome finally had the opportunity to really look at him.

Missing from his right shoulder was the enormous, fluffy pelt; the loss of the pelt made him look smaller, even a little naked. The armor that she had always seen him wear was also replaced with more form-fitting metal, and with armor for both arms instead of only one. They sat close to his shoulders, heavy and unadorned, and around his waist the patterned obi remained, though his swords were missing. Almost as an afterthought, she noticed that he had both arms again. She wondered how long it had taken for him to heal.

All in all, he didn't look much different except for one thing, but that one thing struck Kagome in a way that brought home all that had happened to him, and to herself, in the intervening years. It was like a punch to the stomach – just a little thing – and she wouldn't have even known its significance if she had not been so studious.

It was his kimono. He still wore white clothing, but the flower pattern that had always graced his shoulders and sleeves were gone. In its place was a simple splash of indigo; the color of royalty without a crest.

Sesshoumaru was a king without a kingdom.

It hurt to think of it that way. A prince in exile, his family and household dead, and the years stretched out in front of him, endless, in which he did not age. All the living he could do would never return him to the past, and all her little words that she had planned to tell him suddenly seemed paltry and empty in the face of such loss.

Kagome did not know what to say. Her vision was blurring a little with unshed tears of stress and exhaustion, and before her the youkai lord stood still as a statue while his kimono, bereft of all insignia, fluttered in the breeze. She couldn't take her eyes from his sleeves as they lifted and swelled with each gust of wind, twin banners of solitude in the quiet of the night, and the silence bore down again.

"Yes?" Sesshoumaru finally said.

Startled out of her reverie, Kagome dropped her bow, suddenly in the present again as the task at hand reasserted itself. The bow bounced off her toe. That was smooth, she thought grumpily as she nudged it behind her with her foot. Now what? She had no experience in the field of offering advice to deposed heads of state, but luckily her instincts took over; her mother always taught her to be hospitable to guests, to offer them something to drink or to eat. Well, there was probably no better time to be polite.

"Tea?" she asked brightly. Her voice sounded nonchalant and absurd in the quiet of the campfire.

Sesshoumaru showed no change in expression and said nothing, so after a moment Kagome took this as a sign that he did not object to the offer. "Amaya," she said. Beside her, she heard Amaya start at the sound of her name, and she could feel the other girl's questioning eyes on her. "Could you go fetch some water for us?"

There was a puzzled silence, and then Amaya rose to her feet and came toward Kagome. Leaning in, she whispered as low as possible, "Will you be all right by yourself?" Kagome groaned inwardly. There was no way Sesshoumaru would not have heard such a thing; his hearing was twice as

good as Inuyasha's had been, and the hanyou could detect surreptitious murmurs at twenty paces. It may have been a trick of the light, but she thought his eyes – gold, like his brother's – had narrowed in something resembling irritation.

"I won't be by myself, Amaya," she said out loud, hoping Amaya would just do what she asked. She suddenly had an inkling of what Inuyasha must have felt all those times he told her to stay out of the way and be quiet. "Please, find us some water."

Mercifully, Amaya said nothing else, only bent and rummaged in Kagome's pack for a second before coming up with the kettle and then moving into the trees in the general direction of the stream they had crossed earlier that evening. A few rustles and she was gone, and Kagome was alone inside the legend.

Sesshoumaru had yet to move and Kagome was getting the distinct feeling that she was going to have to do most of the work in this conversation. Her mind was going over the aspects of the story that she had memorized, but unfortunately it seemed to be wrong on most counts. For one, Sesshoumaru had not cut his hair nor donned the clothes of a peasant; for another, she had no idea what to tell him. In the original story, the miko gave the prince black clothing and told him to soak them with his tears, which, in retrospect, was just the sort of damn fool thing that happened all the time in fairytales. Kagome bit her lip.

"Please take a seat," she said finally, bowing a little in deference. Across from her, Sesshoumaru stayed as still as stone. It felt like she was banging her head on a brick wall.

"Then if you do not mind, I would like to sit," she said. "I've been traveling all day."

Silence.

Suppressing the urge to sigh in frustration, Kagome lowered herself to the ground first, sitting seiza and folding her hands in her lap. In her mind, she debated either demonstrating some knowledge of the youkai's situation or feigning ignorance; would he be offended or awed if she addressed his

problem without any beating around the bush? Glancing up at him, she decided that prudence would probably be best. He was still looking at her with narrowed eyes and making her think uncomfortably of how very breakable her bones happened to be. No, perhaps the circumspect approach was best.

"What can I do for you?" she asked as genteelly as possible. No one to kill here! she thought. Move along, move along.

To her surprise, instead of answering, Sesshoumaru stepped to his right and gracefully dropped to his knees, mirroring her posture and tucking his hands into his voluminous sleeves. Kagome had to drop her own hands to the ground and scoot to the side so she was facing him directly, the fire now off to her right.

"Tea would be fine," said the demon.

Kagome didn't know what to say to that. "Amaya will be back in a bit," she finally replied. Sesshoumaru said nothing more.

The minutes stretched out, the king without a kingdom and the maiden without a shrine staring at each other in the light of the fire.

Oh, boy, this is really awkward, Kagome thought, the taut stillness broken only by the crackling flames. The only way it could be more awkward was if Sesshoumaru suddenly started to pick his nose.

Please, please, don't do that, she prayed.

In the trees behind her, Kagome heard the now-familiar step of Amaya, reemerging with a full kettle of water. Sesshoumaru didn't even glance at her as the other girl knelt and set the pot over the fire, and no one spoke as the water began to heat to a boil. It took forever.

When the tea was finally ready, Amaya, in a graceful fashion that surprised Kagome, poured the tea out into cups and placed them next to the sitting figures. Kagome waited as Sesshoumaru slowly unfurled an arm and grasped his cup, bringing it to his lips and sipping, still staring at her. She did the same. The hot tea felt good on her throat and soothed her thoughts somewhat,

which was a pleasant side-effect to what was meant only to be a polite gesture. She took the cup away from her lips and looked back to Sesshoumaru.

His eyes flickered, briefly, in the direction of Amaya.

Kagome immediately understood. "Amaya," she said, this time turning to look at the girl, who still appeared frightened but much more in control than before. "I'm sorry, but could you leave us, please?"

Slowly she nodded and rose. "I – I think I'll go wash my face," she said. As she passed out of the campsite again she picked up her knife and headed back in the direction of the stream.

Kagome decided it was time to try again.

"How can I be of service to you?" she asked, aiming for a more polite approach; perhaps she wasn't showing enough deference to suit his tastes, though a small, but ugly and uncharitable part of her mind snidely remarked that he was in no position to demand any sort of deference at all. Kagome told that part of her to shut up, and waited, gathering her thoughts.

Sesshoumaru, for his part, was coming to a realization. He had thought he had no pride left. He had actually come all the way out here to ask for help from a human – though he told himself it was only to placate Myouga – so he was clearly at the bottom of the pit of despair, and his old, stiff-necked pride was surely gone. Surely.

Unfortunately he was being promptly and brutally disabused of that notion as he sat and studied the miko who was most certainly real and who was most certainly the miko who had traveled with his brother.

He had come to ask for her help, and now he was suddenly ashamed to have showed his face. He had been on the verge of breaking and running when she had called out his name, and that voice dredged up such a strange mix of memory that he had stopped in his tracks, feeling fifty years younger, once again imprisoned in that time that he had tried so earnestly to forget.

It had been the first time in years anyone had said his name without appending the honorific –sama, as though she was an equal, or an old friend of

the family. Which, in a way, she was, he supposed. But she'd never called him Sesshoumaru-sama, even when they'd been at the start of their acquaintance. She brought back a rush of recollection; the air must have smelled sweeter then, and he had felt more alive, hunting down his enemies, pondering the puzzle of Rin, circling his brother throughout the country, and coming to terms with his father's legacy. Strange… he recalled those times as happier, though he could not remember actually being content. Perhaps they were only happy in retrospect; perhaps those years were only happy because he had not been miserable.

Her voice had reached down through the leaden fog that crowded him and drawn out the places he never thought to see again...

And despite the overwhelming apathy that had drained his years of color, Sesshoumaru found, staring at this impossible priestess whose name he could not really remember, that there was still a small measure of hope that had been slumbering, unnoticed and uncalled upon, somewhere in his soul. He was here for his old life; this old face could be a sign.

He had to ask her for her help. He had never asked for help in his entire mature life.

Kagome watched as a shadow passed across Sesshoumaru's eyes, his first movement in almost a minute. She gazed at him in fascination, wondering what he was thinking, curious as to what he was going to do. She watched expectantly. Slowly, almost painfully, as though his bones were iron and his joints stained with rust, Sesshoumaru placed a hand on the ground in front of him. Then he placed the other next to it, his thumbs and fingers forming a triangle. Realization hit her.

He was going to bow.

The thought filled her with humiliated horror. It was bad enough when people she didn't even know bowed to her; she somehow couldn't stand the thought of her only link to the past humbling himself, even when she was the only witness. "Don't," she said quickly.

Immediately he stopped, but did not return to his former position.

"Please," she added.

Slowly he sat up.

Kagome could feel her fingers fiddling with her sleeves, a gesture that made her seem more nervous than she actually felt. Forcing herself to stop, she took a deep breath.

"Please," she said again. "Tell me what you need."

"I need my land," he replied, the words dropping from his lips like lead weights, heavy and unexpected.

Immediately, Kagome responded. "What happened to it?"

He seemed unaccustomed to speaking. "My father's vassals..." He stopped, as though searching for the right words. "His vassals... decided they would be more fit to rule."

Like pulling teeth, Kagome thought. "How?" she asked him.

A long pause. Kagome counted to ten. "They burned the house and killed my household."

"They killed everyone?"

For the first time that night, Sesshoumaru's expression actually changed. He shot her an annoyed glare. "I was away in the North. I was not there when it happened," he told her, as though she had accused him of impotence.

Kagome raised her hands in a conciliatory gesture. "I didn't say it was your fault," she said, a little shrilly. Those glaring, golden eyes were rather unnerving.

His eyes narrowed further, and Kagome shifted uncomfortably. "I could hear you not saying it," he said, his tone of voice even and measured.

Kagome blinked, then frowned, momentarily distracted. She repeated what he had just said in her mind. Then she went over it again. "Wait a minute," she

wondered, "how can you hear someone not say something?"

Sesshoumaru sat up a little straighter. He hadn't actually thought about it, so he sniffed to hide his confusion. Now that he was confronted with the situation, he silently wondered why he was being so uncouth. She hadn't been anything but deferential and polite; it was just his stinging pride that put the laughter in her eyes.

That was probably it. Even though it went against all reason, he had been just that much more humiliated when she had stopped him from making the proper gestures, as one who needed the aid of another. He needed help; he didn't know why it stung so much that she would offer it freely, and it was putting him on edge.

She was still looking puzzled. "Sometimes it is what one doesn't say that is important," he finally told her. He mentally congratulated his brain for the save. It sounded pretty slick, if he did say so himself.

Kagome frowned even harder. "But I didn't not say it," she told him.

Sesshoumaru remained stoic.

Kagome shook her head quickly, trying to steer the conversation back on track before it became any more surreal. "Never mind, that's not important. The question is, what do you want me to tell you?"

Sesshoumaru gave the barest of elegant shrugs. "You are the miko. You tell me what I need to do."

Twisting her mouth in frustration, Kagome thought back to the fairytale that had sent her on this bizarre quest. "I believe you should find new allies."

Sesshoumaru arched a brow.

"You know," Kagome continued, "ones that won't stab you in the back."

That narrowing of the eyes again. "It is an option to pursue," he replied. "But," he glanced over her left shoulder, staring off into the distance, "that is not why I am here."

There it was. Kagome looked away from him and stared down at her hands. "I know."

The wind rustled in the trees, and the shivering leaves made her think of autumn, and the coming winter.

Her fingers were worrying the cuff of her haori sleeve again. The fabric felt thick and coarse, but warm, beneath her fingertips, and the heavy stitching was strong and stable. The haori would not wear out for years. Kagome ran a thumb over it, searching for the right words.

"You are... sad," she said. "About Rin."

Sesshoumaru said nothing, and Kagome remembered Inuyasha, whom she had known and loved, and Kikyou, whom she had never known but who was a part of her still. She wished, with the knowledge that it was not possible, to see them again; she wished to know them.

"You wish you had appreciated her while she was still alive."

For a long moment the demon was still.

"Yes," he finally said.

She licked her lips. "Everyone feels that way, when someone dies."

Sesshoumaru looked away – really looked away this time, turning his face outward into the darkness.

"I know that," he informed her. His voice was low and flat.

Kagome sighed, but it wasn't frustrated. She felt resigned, and tired. "You know," she said conversationally, "my mother used to tell me that as long as you remembered someone, they weren't really gone. But I don't think that's true. My father died when I was ten years old, and I still remember him. But..." Her heart felt heavy, like cold iron in her chest. "I don't really remember all of him. I remember what he looked like, and sometimes I remember his voice and the way he smiled. But that's not really him. He was made of a hundred

other things I've forgotten, that really made him who he was. So he really is gone."

The breeze stirring his long, silver hair caught her eye, and Kagome raised her gaze and watched it swell and fall.

"And what do you do then?" he asked, sounding far away.

Kagome shrugged tiredly. "I guess you do what you have to do. You keep living until they don't haunt you any longer. Until you both forget and remember and it doesn't hurt as much."

A pregnant pause. "How long does that take?"

She wanted to cry. "It feels like forever. But it probably isn't."

"Probably?"

"Maybe probably. I don't know."

Sesshoumaru didn't respond to that. He turned back toward her. "You are a reincarnation," he said simply. "The reincarnation of Inuyasha's first mate."

"Yes." Kagome wondered if Kikyou would have known what to say.

"There are... reincarnations... in this world."

"Yes."

He was looking at her again with that piercing gaze. "But," he said slowly, as though acknowledging a hard truth, "they are not the same."

Kagome shook her head. "No. They are not."

He nodded once.

The memory of a little girl ran, laughing, through Kagome's head.

"She must have been very scared," she whispered, knowing Sesshoumaru

would hear her. Her forefinger was picking at one of the stitches on her sleeve, loosening it just a little. The demon stared at her hands.

"She wants vengeance," he said quietly.

Kagome closed her eyes. "Maybe."

"Maybe?"

"Maybe it's just you who needs revenge."

He let out a breath he seemed to have been holding. "Yes," he replied. "Maybe."

"Just remember that it won't bring her back," Kagome said. It sounded trite and cliché, even to her own ears.

He snorted softly. "I know that."

She shook her head. "I mean… when you kill her murderers…" Here she looked up at the sky, at the twinkling stars, as though seeking what she truly meant to say in them. "When you kill them, and you don't feel any better, don't be surprised."

He was silent for a long while. Kagome continued to loosen the threads of her sleeve. The stitches were becoming damp from the slight sheen of sweat that covered her palms, and her fingernails were growing weaker. She waited for him to say something.

"Why?" he finally asked, and Kagome didn't have to hear the rest of the question to know what he was asking.

"Because... you know, they say it makes you stronger to lose someone. But I don't know. It seems to hurt just as much each time."

"Then why?"

She didn't answer for a minute. She was afraid her voice would crack. Finally she just shrugged.

"Because," she told him. She looked up at him and smiled wanly. There was no better answer; it was the best and worst reason she could give for something so stupid and so wise. "Just because."

He didn't respond. Instead he slowly and gracefully rocked back on his heels and unfolded in one liquid movement to his full height. Kagome stood as well, somewhat more clumsily, her hands still fisted in her haori, the cuffs looking frayed and worn.

"And what next?" he asked her.

She almost laughed. "I don't know," she said to him. "I guess it's up to you."

He did laugh then, that small, sharp sound that was like an audible smirk.

Sesshoumaru gazed down at her; he could smell salt tears hanging just on the verge of being shed, and it struck him that she was grieving as well, although for whom he did not know. It didn't really matter though; her grief was not his grief. Her sadness was not like his. It was personal, private. It was something she would take out late at night and turn over and over in her hands, relishing its weight and its misery before putting it away again. He wondered if it was difficult.

It was so strange to feel something again that he almost hadn't known what she meant when she had asked if he was sad. But he was sad. It was terrible and painful and both better and worse than being so numb that he was nothingness in the shroud of his body.

For the first time in years, he felt painfully alive.

He glanced down. Her hands, always in motion, were slowly and methodically ripping her haori to shreds in sharp, nervous movements. And he remembered, quickly, slowly, that Rin used to do that when she was anxious or scared.

He had forgotten. He wanted to laugh out loud, long and hard.

He didn't laugh. Instead he reached out – with both hands this time, he had

never had both hands while Rin had been alive, and it had been more difficult to do this – and gently pried her fingers from the cloth, softly soothing them until they were limp in his own, and then let go.

"You'll ruin your kimono," he told her. She nodded, looking at him with wide eyes.

Sesshoumaru turned around, and walked into the forest, the moonlight falling down around him, and feeling so sad and so light that he thought he might dissipate into the silver air and fade in the night breeze.

But he didn't, so he kept on walking.

Kagome watched him go.

* * *

A note on Sesshoumaru's clothing: my take on the significance of Sesshoumaru's new clothing is not entirely accurate; in canon, he wears a semiformal outfit with a flower pattern (which I assume has some significance due to his dokkasou attack). He also wears red in the anime and purple to purple blue in the manga, which are all colors that represent royalty, so that part is true. However, from what I understand it's only extremely formal clothes that will have only a few insignia on them denoting rank and family, but I'm fudging what I've read to fit my own selfish purposes and saying the flower pattern, or lack thereof, is significant. It's good to remember this: if something sounds fishy, assume I made it up.

Chapter Seven

"Affliction, like the iron-smith, shapes as it smites." -- Christian Nestell Bovee

* * *

Kagome waited until Sesshoumaru had melted into the night before lowering herself on shaking legs to the ground. She was shocked that she had spoken so much about herself, but she was even more shocked that Sesshoumaru had responded. Her hands – the hands he had touched and gently kneaded in his own – were limp and useless as she tried to support herself from curling down to the earth. Her arms were shaking, too, her bones like fine down pillows, holding their shape but offering no support. She finally settled for crossing her legs and leaning forward, letting her elbows cut into the fold of her body.

He had remembered her. She was the reincarnation. Kagome felt cold. It was both a strange relief and quietly devastating to realize that someone else remembered Kikyou and herself, remembered the two of them in their sad, unknowing dance around each other and the endless fall toward reconciliation. He remembered her as the copy. She was the next version, showing the decay of replication, without the memories and the wisdoms of the original. He had spoken and she was falling until what he had said next had pulled her up short, like a parachute ballooning above her, saving her from the endless plunge.

"But they are not the same."

No, they are not the same. She could hear the great, hollow thoughts ringing inside his head when he had asked the question; she knew he had been thinking of finding Rin's next body, looking for her again and taking her in, but within a few breathless seconds he had realized that she wouldn't be the girl he had known.

Kagome wondered how many times Inuyasha had looked at her and felt that same regret, and then felt irrationally annoyed, as if his memory had been somehow tainted.

"Kagome-sama?"

The voice of Amaya was unexpected, and her irritation immediately ebbed as Kagome turned quickly to see the other girl emerging from the trees. It felt like she had been gone for a lifetime. "Amaya," she said quietly. Strangely, Kagome was suddenly tired and weary, as though she had been trudging for many miles with a heavy weight on her back. She wanted to go to sleep and not wake up until she was happy again, until all the fluttering memories were stilled.

Amaya was walking toward her cautiously, holding out a hand as though she wanted to simultaneously comfort the miko and ward her away. "What did it do to you?" she said. Her tone sounded accusing.

Kagome blinked slowly, not comprehending what Amaya was asking her. "...what?"

Now that she was closer, Amaya looked angry and frightened, like all the people who had ever come into contact with Inuyasha without understanding what he was, and Kagome was again struck with exhausted longing and that curious and heartbreaking nostalgia that always crept into her mind whenever she was reminded of him.

"He grabbed your hands!" Amaya said, loudly. Her voice sounded sharp and fractured against the quiet of the night. Kagome winced slightly.

"You were watching?"

Amaya immediately shut her mouth, looking shamefaced.

"Did you hear what we said?" Kagome asked. The thought made her feel even more tired and sad. What she had said… she couldn't even remember most of it now, and it had only been a few minutes. It had all seemed so significant, but now she wondered if she had said anything at all; her memory of the conversation was bright and hazy, too full of reined emotions and thoughts unvoiced to be easily recalled.

Slowly, Amaya shook her head. "I couldn't hear anything. You were too quiet," she mumbled sullenly.

Kagome sat up a little straighter and passed a hand over her forehead, trying to be her own comforter, trying to soothe away the wave of fatigue that was threatening to put her to sleep where she sat. That would probably be a bad thing; she might topple over into the fire. "Sesshoumaru probably knew you were there, you know."

She could practically hear the blood draining from Amaya's face. "What? How could it? I doubled back twice and hid myself really well!"

"He's a dog demon. He has an excellent sense of smell. He probably knew you couldn't hear him; otherwise he might have injured you." Or worse.

Amaya was quiet for a moment. "I just wanted to make sure you would be all right," she finally confessed. Kagome let her hand drop as she looked up, and smiled in what she hoped was a reassuring manner.

"Thank you, but I was fine."

Amaya looked doubtful in the light of the fire. There was a set to her stance, a certain bending of the leg and concerned hunch of the shoulders that reminded Kagome so sharply of Sango that she hissed involuntarily.

Nighttime, the completed Shikon no Tama clutched in her fist, Kagome looked up at her friend.

"Kagome-chan, are you sure you will be all right?" Sango's voice was quiet and concerned and full of a lovely protective edge that made Kagome feel safer. Whatever happened, Sango would be there.

"I'm sure," she had answered. She had made her decision, but she was fine. Fine, nothing to worry about. If she could have drawn her heart out into the twilight, it would have twinkled with bristles of broken glass. Fine.

Sango had looked at her with knowing eyes as Kagome turned away and bedded down for the last night in which she would still be able to pretend that Inuyasha might love her.

She didn't sleep.

"Kagome-sama?"

"Don't call him it," Kagome said tiredly. "He has a name."

To her surprise, Amaya looked chagrined. "I'm sorry, I just never know what to call youkai. I don't meet many of them, you know. Not like you."

Kagome thought of all the base youkai she had burned clean with her arrows, never knowing if they had names or even genders.

"It's okay."

Amaya took another step toward her and lowered herself to the ground, so they were on the same level.

"How do you know him?" she asked quietly.

Kagome was silent for a moment. "We… fought together. Long ago," she finally said, although her words couldn't begin to describe the times he'd threatened the lives of her compatriots or made their lives miserable or better according to his whims. It was like saying that she and Inuyasha had ‘traveled together' or were ‘comrades' – it was hopelessly futile trying to define the feelings between people who had faced the darkness together.

"What did he need?" Amaya asked.

Kagome looked at the ground and traced a finger around in the dirt. "Advice. He lost his land," she told her. "And a child."

Amaya sat back on her heels. "Ah," she said knowingly, and Kagome glanced up to see her give a sage nod. Kagome frowned, questioning.

"My mother lost my brother," Amaya supplied and Kagome was once again sharply reminded of Sango, who had also lost a brother but then found him again. "He was conscripted into the army when I was very little, and he was killed while fighting. My mother never recovered." Her eyes slid away from Kagome's and to the fire, her face a wistful mask. "I didn't know him, but my mother did. She loved him more than she loved herself. So when he died..." She

spread her hands, as if to say there was nothing for it. "When he died she went to pieces. That's why I know how to fish and hunt and how to track. I had to take his place for her."

Amaya turned back to Kagome and shrugged. "I guess she put too much of her hope in one person," she said. "It made it harder on her. Maybe he's going through that, too."

"Too much hope," Kagome repeated, and like fine crystal sounds pure when tapped, the words rang true – not for Sesshoumaru, but for herself. In the quiet void between one breath and the next Kagome felt the weight of those words as she tumbled, over and over, into the empty space left behind by her impossible love -

And then Amaya moved and the moment was gone. Kagome smiled at her – this poor girl whom she always compared to Sango but who was really nothing like her – and said, "Perhaps."

Amaya grinned back in the firelight.

* * *

The world was gilded pale gold by the early dawn sunlight when Sesshoumaru finally awoke from his long and dangerous sleep to greet the morning. The air was fresh and clear and bright, but there was something filling him that was so dark and sullen that it took a few long moments for Sesshoumaru to recognize it as fury.

It was like hot magma poured down the inside of his spine, pooling in his belly and setting him on fire. Everything around him seemed wrong, as if he were lying askew across the parallel lines of the universe; he felt cramped and useless, like a broken and badly repaired puzzle piece jammed into a spot where it no longer fit. He was trapped in his own body, far away from where he was supposed to be, far from his fractured memories and the lands of his ancestors, in this place that meant nothing to him, and the only reason he was there was due to treachery, and deceit.

Insects were crawling beneath his skin; his head hurt in a way that had

nothing to do with any physical ailments, and he could feel his toes curling in his shoes. His soul was trying to break free of his very skin. Unconsciously, he cracked his knuckles, the sound loud and sharp in the morning air.

Sesshoumaru was enraged.

When Myouga dropped by only a quarter of an hour later he found the Lord of the West methodically chopping down trees with an expression so chilled and determined that the old flea nearly turned around and traveled back the way he had come. He perched atop a small rock and watched as the taiyoukai carved up his small corner of the forest as though he were doing nothing more taxing than picking flowers.

It was a bit mesmerizing, actually. Myouga watched as Sesshoumaru whipped around, his body curved into strangely balletic arcs, and sliced through another tree trunk with his claws, leaving only a smoking and slightly melted stump – adding to his already impressive collection of other slightly melted stumps – and a lot of wasted firewood. Then he turned and aimed for another tree, slicing this one at the base before carving the rest into ribbons as it hit the ground, his movements tight and controlled and filled with a deadly energy that Myouga had not seen for decades. It was so strange to see it again that it seemed almost new, and in his bones the old flea could feel a change in the wind. He made a decision.

"Sesshoumaru-sama!" he cried as he hopped across the ground toward the son of his old master. Sesshoumaru stopped in mid-swing and seemed to forcibly calm himself. Myouga took the chance to hop up his clothing and settle on his shoulder. "You are looking much better today, Sesshoumaru-sama! Did you go and see the miko?" There could be no other explanation for this sudden change in behavior. The very way the demon held himself bespoke resolve and a quiet anger that must have lain dormant for years, and nothing before now had brought it to life. Myouga wondered what enchantments the miko had put upon his master, but decided that whatever she had done did not really matter, since it seemed a step in the right direction.

Sesshoumaru did not answer right away. Instead he walked to a tree that he had left standing and sat beneath it, not looking at Myouga. Patiently the old servant waited.

"Myouga," Sesshoumaru finally said, "do you remember Inuyasha's miko?"

Myouga had not been expecting this. "Which one?" he asked.

Turning his head slightly, Sesshoumaru gave him what could possibly be construed as a look of disgust. "The real one," he said.

"Kikyou-sama?"

"No."

"You mean... Kagome-sama?"

Sesshoumaru nodded.

"Well... yes, I remember her very well. She was a lovely girl, very delicious."

Sesshoumaru didn't seem to have anything to say to that.

Myouga waited.

After a few minutes he opened his mouth again. "Was she... human?" Sesshoumaru asked, very slowly, his eyes still gazing somewhere into the middle distance.

Myouga thought this to be an odd thing to say, but wisely refrained from mentioning this. "Yes she was, milord."

"So there is no way she could still be alive?"

"Well," Myouga, who always found this subject to be difficult, said slowly, "she could be. Some humans live a very long time, after all..." He trailed off.

Sesshoumaru turned and looked at him, and in his eyes Myouga saw something dark and simmering and furious. "What do you know?" he said. The tone was light, but beneath it was a thread of steel.

"Well..."

The demon waited, and the flea felt an undercurrent of anger, rippling under his calm surface.

"She… traveled through time. She was from the future," Myouga said quickly. In truth Kagome's time-traveling had always confused him whenever he gave it any thought – and so generally he avoided thinking about it at all – but something tickled his mind at the odd question.

Sesshoumaru's face did not move.

"I see," was all he said.

Myouga frowned. "Why do you ask, milord?"

Sesshoumaru said nothing, only rose and ran a hand through his long silver hair. "Come, Myouga," he commanded.

"Wait!" Myouga felt he was missing something very important. "Milord, why do you ask? Have you seen her?"

The demon paused for a moment before giving an elegant shrug. "That is inconsequential," he replied. "We are leaving."

"Milord, is she alive?"

Finally Sesshoumaru looked down at the flea. "Yes," he told him. "But that is not important."

Myouga did not agree with this assessment. "Sesshoumaru-sama, why did you not tell me this information right away?" he cried as he hopped up and down, agitatedly waving his arms as though he were trying to fly. "I must go and see her!"

A growl cut him off. "No. You have to come with me," Sesshoumaru informed him as he began to walk northeast.

"But milord, where are we going?"

"We are going to find allies," was the reply.

Myouga grew very still, wondering if he had heard properly.

"Allies, milord?"

"Yes," Sesshoumaru told him, voice colored darkly as he emerged from the forest into a clearing, and to Myouga's eyes it seemed as though he was riding a shining shadow as it passed across the sunlit ground, burning coldly in the golden light. "We are going to war."

* * *

Two days later Kagome woke up with a headache and a flea on her face. The headache was from too much terrible village sake – her reward for exterminating an extremely low-level youkai that had invaded the grain stores – so Kagome did not immediately understand how extraordinary it was for her to have Myouga attached to her nose and breaking his fast.

Going on the assumption that moving was a bad idea, Kagome ineffectually swatted at the flea several times before her brain caught on and she sat straight up on the sleeping mat the villagers had thoughtfully provided. Next to her, Amaya snored.

"Myouga-jii-chan!" she exclaimed, but quietly due to the pressure in her skull. She cupped her hands and let the old flea hop down. "I didn't know you were still alive!" she said, feeling a strange twinge in her chest.

"Kagome-sama, it is so good to see you!" Myouga exclaimed. "And you don't look much older! How is that possible?"

Kagome shrugged. "I don't really know," she said. "I jumped through the well, and I ended up... well, now. But how are you? How did you know where to find me?"

"I heard from Sesshoumaru-sama that you were still alive, and so I came to see you!"

Cocking her head to the side and ignoring how the world washed up and down, Kagome digested this information. "You saw Sesshoumaru?" she said.

"Oh yes! He is my lord's only son! I am in his service," Myouga replied, "although he does not usually require anything of me."

"How did he look?" Kagome asked. "We ran into each other a couple of days ago."

"Um… he looked energetic. But I am curious as to how you found each other. What are you doing so far north?" Myouga demanded. He thought the miko looked a little pale and drawn, but she smelled a little bit of alcohol, so that might have been causing her wearied condition. He watched as she sighed.

"I've been wandering around for a few weeks," she replied, "trying to figure out how to go back home. The well stopped working once I was through."

Myouga crossed his arms. He felt something tickle his brain again; in a very long life he had learned to trust such instincts. "Why did you try to come back?" he asked. "You are clearly older than you were when you left, and I cannot believe that you would not have tried before now."

Kagome looked away guiltily. She had not told anyone of her original purpose; it seemed silly and irrational in retrospect. "Well – to see my friends, of course," she told him. "I just had this urge, I guess."

Myouga refrained from rolling his eyes. He was an old man and had seen many things, and he prided himself in knowing when someone was avoiding a truth. He'd done it often enough to know what it looked like, anyway. He waited.

Peering down at the flea, Kagome thought he looked slightly annoyed with her, which upset her in part because having people annoyed at her still made her feel bad, and in part because squinting made her headache worse. She was too tired to be upset.

"You don't believe that, right?" she asked him.

Myouga shook his head. In his experience people usually filled up the silence with things that hinted at the truth, but like always, Kagome was different. She

got right to the point. It was weirdly refreshing at his time of life.

Passing a hand across her face, Kagome smiled wanly, and as methodically as possible she told Myouga the whole story, from returning to the present to entering college to finding the fable to running into Sesshoumaru, too late to save the maiden but not too late to save the lord himself.

"And so now we're trying to find another priestess – a real one, not me – who can open the well again," she finished. She felt a little better after going over the story, as though revisiting it made it less real.

For the past several nights since Sesshoumaru came to see her she had been having dreams in which all her dead friends came back to speak to her. They were small and gentle dreams, in which she knew she was dreaming and her friends were not real, but they felt real. One by one they would sit in her circle of firelight and drink tea and stab her through the heart with longing. Shippou had asked for candy and Sango wanted to know how she was doing and Miroku sat behind her and rubbed her shoulders and wondered out loud about her love life. And Inuyasha just sat there and looked at her, a hanyou again, coarse white hair turning yellow in the light of the fire, and in her dream, her face crumpled and she cried.

But they were just dreams, and she hoped and feared that once she was back through the well they would disappear.

Myouga was shaking his head again. "Kagome-sama, you should go back to Edo," he told her.

"What?" Kagome asked, confused. "But the well won't open again!"

"Yes, it will," he said. "You've clearly fulfilled your destiny here."

Kagome blinked. "My destiny? But I didn't do what I came here to do…"

The flea sighed; Kagome could be rather dense sometimes. "That's not the point. You filled your part of the story. You can go home now."

"How do you know that?" wondered Kagome.

"Well it stands to reason, doesn't it?" said Myouga. "The well let you through to be the miko in the story, and now that you aren't in the story any longer you are probably free to go back."

A frisson of hope and a sad sort of fear went up Kagome's spine. "I guess that makes sense," she said slowly. "Will you travel with me?"

In her voice, the old flea could hear a note of desperation. He had heard it many times before, in many different voices, but somehow coming from Kagome it had the power to break his heart, as though she had taken a tiny hammer to a badly repaired fault line. He leapt from her hands to her shoulder and laid a hand against her neck; he could feel the tension in it, so tense, like Inuyasha used to be. "I cannot," he said. "I have to be on hand for Sesshoumaru-sama in case he needs me."

Kagome nodded, and was glad Myouga could not see her face. She didn't feel up to concealing her loneliness. "What would he need you for?"

"He's going to war, and he's not very good at negotiating with new allies," Myouga replied. "He's already going east to meet with some of the lords and ladies there to ask for their friendship as he reclaims his land. He will be most pleased when I tell him that he will definitely succeed."

Deftly Kagome plucked Myouga from her shoulder. "You can't do that!" she said anxiously as she held him in front of her face. "That could change everything!"

The old flea was confused. He struggled. "What? How is that? It's better than prophecy!"

"Just... don't, okay? It's too complicated to explain, but he can't know that he's going to win, all right?" Kagome gave him a pleading look, and he could see the deep circles under her eyes. She may have still been young, but she seemed to feel much, much older. "Please, Myouga-jii-chan. It's very important."

Myouga stilled. "All right, Kagome-sama. For you."

Kagome gave a sigh of relief. "Thank you, jii-chan," she said, releasing him. Myouga hopped down to the ground and adjusted his traveling pack.

"I'm sorry I can't stay longer, Kagome-sama, but I left Sesshoumaru without his leave," he informed her. "I need to return quickly."

"Wait!" Kagome almost cried. Myouga stopped in mid-turn and looked back at her.

"Yes, Kagome-sama?"

"Do you know – do you know where Miroku-sama and Sango-chan are?" she asked, and he heard something hesitant in her voice, as though she were afraid to ask.

He hated to let her down, but he had to. "No I do not, Kagome-sama. They disappeared after Inuyasha and Kikyou…"

Kagome cut him off with a sharp nod. "Thank you anyway, jii-chan. Please be careful."

Myouga turned and bowed to her. "I am sorry, Kagome-sama. It was good to see you again. I wish you fortune in your life."

Kagome smiled sadly. "I wish you well, also," she replied, and then Myouga was across the floor and out the door before he could change his mind.

* * *

Negotiations were not going well, and Sesshoumaru was still itchy in his skin, anger curdling in his blood. It wasn't helping matters. It would have been better if he was still in a void, suspended in the emptiness of not caring, but then he wouldn't have been here in the first place. He wished he could still feel nothing; it would have made things much easier.

His heart thrummed under his armor, a steady beat of fury. Sesshoumaru had never considered himself a natural diplomat since, in general, a quick slice to the neck solved most problems, and he wanted nothing more than to start killing things right now. However, he was not in a position to be slicing open necks, since allies needed to be alive in order to fight, and he wasn't entirely

sure that he wanted to take on a second group of less powerful but still allied youkai in order to bend them to his will. Their demands were outrageous.

"Land, Sesshoumaru-sama, or no help from us," said Hoshiko. She was a powerful fire demon that had been a friend of his father's, although he would have never guessed it from the way she was acting. She had become the unofficial spokesperson for the small collection of Eastern lords solely based on her prior acquaintance with his family, but she was giving him a bit of a problem.

Negotiations had been going on for almost three hours now, and all he wanted to do was go outside and cut more trees down, or find something to fight, or maybe fight himself, since he was probably the only worthy opponent in the whole of the Eastern lands. It irked him that he had to find allies. He wanted to sweep across the Western lands like a shadow, and to kill his inconstant vassals, who betrayed him and threw him into the sea. He dreamed it at night, and ground his teeth during the day whenever he thought of it, which was all the time.

However, Hoshiko, aging queen of the fractured lands of the east, was compromising his goals. At the very least she was angering him to no end, and he wanted nothing more than to kill her, if it wouldn't set even more dubious friends against him. If I had Tenseiga, I could kill her, and then revive her, he thought, attempting to stave off murder with soothing thoughts. That would show her.

"Sesshoumaru-sama!"

He refocused on her face. She looked annoyed.

"If these negotiations are a waste of your time, Sesshoumaru-sama, then by all means let us disband," she said.

Sesshoumaru narrowed his eyes and snorted disdainfully. He thought she was being awfully uppity for a woman who had once downed too much sake at one of his father's court gatherings and had molested his father's pelt, thrown up in the garden, and put to bed in his mother's chambers, in that order. To be fair, Sesshoumaru, despite being much younger at the time, remembered quite a bit few other antics at that particular gathering. Still. It was rather annoying

to be turned down by someone who had once ruined his mother's azaleas.

"How much?" he asked

From across the years, Hoshiko, younger but still older than he, bent slightly and ran a hand through his hair. "What a lovely boy!" she exclaimed in a loud voice before tipping gently forward and he had been forced to catch her before she hit the ground. Behind him his father had laughed and told him to be gentle with her.

Sesshoumaru hadn't known what he had meant and said so, which just made everyone laugh harder, and in his arms the woman had smiled and whispered in his ear. She told him that they were laughing at her, and to not worry about it. He had been the one to carry her out into the fresh air, where she had been sick, but it was his mother who had rubbed her back in gentle circles as she moaned on the bed.

Sesshoumaru looked at the woman, an old friend of the family who had drunkenly assured him that he was not to be embarrassed, that it was her fault; now she stared at him coldly, and he hated her. He hated all of them.

"Half," she replied.

He hated her even more. "Too much."

He wanted to scream. He wanted to rip apart this pristine house that reminded him of his own. The timbers mocked him, the servants snickered behind his back, and the light of the East was hot and oppressive. He wanted to slice open his own skin and crawl out.

Sesshoumaru ground his teeth and took a deep breath – and something caught his notice. He breathed in again and almost didn't hear her reply.

"Then no deal."

Sesshoumaru said nothing. Something was tugging at him, screaming at him, telling him to pay attention.

Sesshoumaru sniffed. Across from him, Hoshiko stiffened. One of the other

four youkai coughed. His eyes narrowed even further.

There it was. Curling through his nostrils was the sharp, coppery tang of nerves. Someone was nervous. They were hiding something. But what could it be? They were afraid of him? Possibly. They were afraid of Hoshiko? Doubtful. What could it be?

He stared at Hoshiko. Her eyes fluttered for a brief moment, and it hit him.

"You are having problems with Hatore and the youkai in the West," he guessed, and from the sudden spike in low-grade annoyance and consternation in the room, he had guessed correctly. Sesshoumaru allowed himself a small smirk.

"Then peace," he said. "And nothing more."

"Land," Hoshiko insisted, as though she were in any position to negotiate now. They would not have sat down with him if they had not been having troubles. He ground his teeth again. She was being awfully stubborn for someone on whom the tables had just turned.

"Negotiable, but after," he told her, and now his voice was sharp and hard. His patience was at an end.

The fire youkai snorted. "Agreed," she said, and in her eyes there was a small trace of respect.

Sesshoumaru found he didn't care. That wasn't what he wanted any more.

* * *

A week later Amaya turned to Kagome and hugged her hard. Kagome returned it awkwardly. "Thank you for taking me through the forest," she told the other girl. Amaya just nodded her head against Kagome's shoulder and clung tight. Kagome gave her a few small pats and then disengaged herself only to find to her horror that Amaya had tears in her eyes.

"Thank you for letting me go with you, Kagome-sama!" she said fervently.

Kagome just smiled and nodded, trying not to let her confusion show. Behind her, Sinayo chuckled just a little bit. Kagome was standing in the doorway of Sinayo's hut, preparing to change into her 21st century clothes in privacy.

Amaya looked at the ground, suddenly shy again. "I mean… It was an honor to go with you," she said.

"And it was an honor to have you take me," Kagome replied.

Amaya flashed a small smile, bowed again, and backed away. Kagome retreated into Sinayo's hut. "What was that about?" she wondered under her breath.

The older miko heard her and shrugged. "That will probably be the only time she ever leaves Edo," she said matter-of-factly. "Now, here are your clothes, Kagome-sama. I'm going to go draw some water – I need it anyway – and you can change." Sinayo smiled gently and passed Kagome's clothes to her and exited the hut.

Kagome stood in the dim light of the hut and ran a hand over the fabric in her arms. It felt strange and out of place, and suddenly Kagome wanted to go home more than anything. Slowly she reached up and pulled her hair free of its tie.

* * *

Many leagues away, Sesshoumaru felt something humming in his veins. It was different than the rage that ricocheted inside his skin, seeking release, and he remembered it from long ago. It was anticipation. He was going to war.

Myouga was on his shoulder, though Sesshoumaru did not expect him to stay there. Both of them had been guests in the house of Joben-sama, an ancient but powerful cat youkai who had once taught his father how to fish, and now Sesshoumaru was sitting in his borrowed room gazing at his armor and the borrowed sword propped in the corner.

He didn't belong in this place, in the east. This was not where he was supposed to be. But tonight he was going home. Tonight he would see his land

again. Tonight he would rain down the molten fury that bubbled in his body.

"They will not want to give up the land," Myouga said, almost as though he were talking to the air.

Sesshoumaru did not reply. He felt the call of home already; it tugged at his heart, a chain looped through his chest, pulling him back. It was time. He'd been away for far too long.

"They are comfortable in the land now," said the old flea.

"That is a shame," said the demon prince. In the dimness of the room he inspected his claws. They were good claws; good for what he would have to do.

"They think the land is theirs."

Sesshoumaru gave a sharp laugh, small and knowing in the dark. "They can think that all they like," he said. "But it's not theirs."

He lowered his hand and reached for his armor.

"It's mine."

* * *

Slowly, Kagome untucked the cloth of the haori from the tight hakama that clung to her waist. She slowly slid the fabric over her shoulders and let it drip down her arms to land on the floor. Her long hair brushing against her back made her shiver.

She lowered her hands to the knot at her waist and slowly untied it, relishing the feel of the rough spun fabric rubbing against itself. She let the hakama drop to the floor as well, pooling around her ankles, and stepped out of them.

Off came the shoes. Off came the tabi.

She picked up her t-shirt where it lay in the neat pile. She shook it out before

scrunching it up and pulling it over her head. Reaching down, Kagome retrieved her jeans. She stepped into them, right leg first, then the left, and pulled them up over her hips and fastened them. They felt strange and restrictive, and as if they were falling off. They came up to just below her naval, and it was strange to be simultaneously less clothed and more confined.

She sat down and pulled on her socks, and then slipped her sneakers on and laced them up.

Kagome stood, threw her backpack over her shoulder, and left the hut.

* * *

The bone armor felt good and rough beneath his hands; it caught his skin roughly, and its reassuring weight settled well on his body as he tied the leather straps that held it in place. The heaviness settled on his hips, pulling him down to the earth. It felt right.

Carefully, Sesshoumaru placed his sode on his right shoulder and tied it tightly, moving his arm to let it settle a bit around the muscle and skin and fabric beneath it. Then he strapped on the left one.

He knelt and picked up his obi, and then carefully, enjoying the feel of the slick silk sliding over itself, tied it into its elaborate knot.

Finally he picked up the sword that his father's old friend had lent to him. He pulled it out of its sheath and examined it. It had clearly seen many battles – there were nicks and scratches all along the blade – and the cloth around the handle was frayed and coming apart.

It was a good sword though, and would serve him well. He gave it a few practice swings before sheathing it again. Reverently, he slid it into place at his hip.

It was time to go. Pivoting on the ball of his foot, Sesshoumaru left the room.

* * *

Kagome stood by the well a long time, staring into it, wondering if it would allow her to return again. She wished Myouga had stayed with her. She wished she could have found Miroku and Sango. She wished that Rin hadn't died, and that she had been able to save her. She wished that Shippou had still been around. She wished to even see Kirara again, to hold the small cat against her cheek and cry her eyes out. She wished Sesshoumaru hadn't left so quickly.

She wished Inuyasha hadn't died.

As though moving through glue, she placed her hands on the splintery wood of the well before placing a knee on the lip. She swung one leg over and then the other.

Staring into the depths of the well, she closed her eyes and wished...

Kagome leapt.

* * *

Sesshoumaru crossed the border into the Moonlit Country and turned his face, implacable and hard, towards the House of the Moon. Almost not caring if his allies followed, Sesshoumaru sped across the silver grasses and through the trees, and in his veins his blood buzzed with anticipation. He was going home.

High above him, the moon hung in the sky. Less than a half a cycle ago he had met with the miko under the dark light of the new moon, and now it was waxing, shining brightly against the canopy of stars. His house was rising.

The Prince of the Western Lands, his small host spread out behind him, crested a hill, and saw below the ruins of the House of the Moon, and the newer house, where his enemy dwelled.

He wanted to scream. He wanted to rend and tear and roar. Inside his head the phantoms of his old life arose, and he wanted them back. He wanted justice and vengeance and blood on his claws.

He wanted Rin, but she wasn't there.

Gazing down at the ruins of his world, he bared his teeth and wanted...

Sesshoumaru leapt.

Warning: This chapter depicts scenes of graphic violence.

Tales from the House of the Moon
by
Resmiranda

Chapter Eight

"No battle is worth fighting except the last one." -- Enoch Powell

* * *

His sensitive hearing picked up the distant sound of the alarm as he came down the mountain, toes barely skimming the cool grass that flew by beneath him. It was rising up from beyond the ruins of his ancestral home, in the sprawling, new-built compound further down the mountainside – a call to arms, dark and shrill against the heavy night. His hand was already on the hilt of his sword, waiting for the first dead body to come running out of the house.

"In war, it is best to think of them as corpses," his father had said, his voice rich and dark and the blood still fresh on his sword. In front of Sesshoumaru, still small and young, the headless body in the middle of the road twitched and stank of bowels loosed. His father had been taken by surprise, and hadn't made a clean cut the first time. Later, Sesshoumaru would learn to make a clean kill, quickly and efficiently, so the trauma wouldn't void the bladder and the bowels. But right then, he had just wanted to vomit from the stench.

"They may be moving, they may still be living," the musical voice had

continued, and the little youkai with silver hair and the burden of fate felt his stomach turn violently, "but they are corpses all the same. Just breathing, walking corpses, who will try to make you a carcass as well. But you are my son. You are the conqueror, and they are not. They are just corpses in your way."

...They are dead, but they don't know it...

Yet.

As it turned out, the first corpse come to pay his due was Suikoshin, stumbling outside. He must have been visiting Hatore, the new lord. Suikoshin, an inuyoukai like himself, his father's friend since long before Sesshoumaru had been born; Suikoshin, who had given Rin's only eulogy.

"At least she was a bit of fun," he had said, reeking of her death.

Now he looked ridiculously small against the darkness of the mountainside, and his sword was already out. Sesshoumaru wondered why this man had loomed so large in his mind – he was pitiful, aging – and he watched the old inuyoukai struggle upwards. There was a grim satisfaction in that, and Sesshoumaru was burning with cold fire as the wind whistled by his ears and he plummeted down the mountain, sword still sheathed.

Quick now, you can't hesitate, his father had said, and had showed him how to rip out a heart with his claws without going through the sternum. He had practiced on a monkey, who had screamed pitifully, and at the noise scraping down the inside of his skull, Sesshoumaru's skin crawled over his bones.

No hesitation, said his father, blood running down his arm as he made quick work of the heart.

No hesitation, my son. No joy, no fear. No mercy.

Suikoshin was perilously close, raising his sword high above him, preparing to deal a quick stroke to Sesshoumaru's head to cleave it in two, and his mouth was open in a warrior yell. Sesshoumaru couldn't even hear it over the blood pounding in his ears.

No mercy, he thought.

Closer, closer, he was almost there, and then Suikoshin was right in front of him and Sesshoumaru banked sharply to the right drawing his sword as he did so, and he felt the steel – reinforced by the weight of his body – catch Suikoshin's clothes and bulbous stomach, slicing cleanly through layers of fat and muscle, dragging the other inuyoukai around to face his back. Immediately Sesshoumaru pivoted and brought his sword up, blocking the desperate downward stroke – injured, bleeding, stumbling desperate stroke – and Suikoshin tripped past him, bent over, struggling to breathe. His long black hair, held up in its queue, fell to the side, exposing his neck.

No hesitation. The hilt of his sword was already whirling heavily in his hands as he moved the sword into position in a tight arc, and Sesshoumaru brought the blade down against his opponent's neck. The sharp steel bit into skin, and then through grating bone and leathery cartilage, and Suikoshin's head rolled down the mountain while the rest of him twitched and collapsed. He didn't stink of shit; Sesshoumaru felt distantly proud of his clean kill even as he turned and flew on, racing to the next corpse, and now the whole household was up in arms.

It was a female youkai with a sharp ax and Sesshoumaru feinted with his sword, blocking as she put her weight behind a swift hacking motion down and to her right. He hooked the ax with his own blade as he ducked down and into her unwilling embrace, breaking her hold on the handle as his left arm shot straight upwards, through the soft underside of her chin. He didn't have to go any further into her head – brains are so messy, his father had said – but released poison straight into her blood and her mouth.

She probably gagged and gurgled as her lungs melted, but Sesshoumaru was already leaping up and arching back to see, upside down, a sword wielded by a younger male narrowly missing him, and around him his allies were fighting and the clang of metal on metal and the hiss of arrows and fire and lightening were rising against the night.

The world righted itself as he landed on his feet. He felt the muscles in his legs slide against each other beneath his skin as the young man turned, off balance

and in slow motion, to face him, his eyes glazed over with fear. The young youkai could see his own death as Sesshoumaru dropped to a crouch, coiling his power, before propelling himself forward sword already aimed straight and true, through the boy's neck. In reverse this time, Sesshoumaru thought as he stabbed through the esophagus first and then through the spine, severing the nerves.

No time to draw it out, he thought regretfully as he placed his left hand on the young youkai's shoulder, a sad parody of a brotherly pat, and, as the boy fell to his knees, used the leverage to slice through the left half of the youkai's neck, freeing the blade.

He didn't even have to turn to know someone else was already breathing down his back, and he shifted his weight, bringing the sword to his right in a tight upward semi-circle as he slid his feet around. The blade met and broke through bone, severing the right wrist of his newest attacker and slicing partially through the left. Sesshoumaru lunged forward, feeling his left foot slide against the grass of the mountain, feeling his blade slide against the throat of Jurekaru the horse. Sesshoumaru twisted his wrists, digging the blade in as he stared into the eyes of the man who had helped teach him to fight, who had spoken to him first that night.

"She should have run," Jurekaru had said, and Rin's tears had clung to him in the light of Sesshoumaru's burning life.

Should have run, should have run, should have run, run, run – the words echoed inside his head as he drew back, twisting the blade again.

Long ago, he would have thrown the words back. He would have taunted him, twisted more than just the blade.

"I wanna be just like you, nichan!" Inuyasha told him, so little, so frail and so human as they played at fighting in the courtyard of his step-mother's home. Sesshoumaru taunted Inuyasha, and Inuyasha taunted back, but Sesshoumaru always won, even as his baby brother laughed in delight and flexed his little claws. No joy.

She should have run, we've been waiting, should have run.

The blade leapt free of Jurekaru's neck, tiny droplets of blood flying off the blade and onto the youkai's shocked face. More blood spilled, staining his collar.

Should have run.

No joy, his father said.

Sesshoumaru watched the light fade from Jurekaru's eyes, and leapt away.

And then the world faded a little, and he was running on automatic, running through his ruined home, running through his enemies with an old borrowed blade that wasn't his. He wanted his swords again, wanted the power of life and death in his hands so he could bring an end to suffering, wanted the comforting weight of Toukijin settled at his hip. But he didn't have any of that yet, so he fought on, fought so he could.

He slashed and hit and poison leaked from his fingers, and all around him they fell, skin hanging from bone, blood soaking the earth, sometimes spraying; his white haori was stained with brown splotches that weren't his. Each throat or soft stomach that came away in his hand was bloated with the stuff, full of copper and iron, and with each kill there was more blood, clogging his nostrils. Close your eyes when you make the cut or you'll be blinded...

There was too much. Too much blood, too much warm meat clinging beneath his claws, too much noise outside his head, and inside his mind his father droned on and on, ticking off the correct way to make a downward slice, what to do with two opponents from opposite sides, how to rip the larynx with only one's teeth, what to do, how to do it, do it, do it, do it right the first time, and overlaying all of it was the silent sound of tears falling, of failed obligations and lost honor. Too much gone, not enough to fight for, except himself, except the memory of swords at his hip, the memory of servants waking early in the morning and preparing the day, the memory of Jaken, loyal to the last, and the remembrance of Rin, who threw clothes out windows and planted impossible gardens and sang him songs and plaited flowers into his hair when no one else was watching.

Faded memories pressed in even as he thrust a hand into the soft hollow of a throat, even as he nearly choked on the smell of blood, even as he soared over

the charred remains of the House of the Moon, burnt and crumbled. His brain was on fire, filled with rage.

You are sad, Kagome had said, and it was true. Threaded through the fury was shining sorrow, cobalt blue against the crimson of his anger, contrasting with it, intensifying it, burning it into his heart, and each dead enemy only made his rage blaze hotter, only made him more cold with despair.

Somewhere buried beneath it all – the sorrow and the rage, the screams, the lectures and the muted tears – Sesshoumaru roared, and plunged onward.

* * *

The magic caught, and Kagome didn't know whether to laugh or cry, so she did both, just a little bit. It wasn't a loud laugh and it was only one tear, but it encompassed her feelings accurately enough. She was feeling just a tad overwrought again.

Gently the magic laid her down at the bottom of the well. The sudden, true darkness above her told her she was inside the well house again, and the rancid smells of the city came crashing down over her head, telling her she was in her own time, where she clearly belonged.

Mmm, exhaust, she thought, the dirty smell crawling into her hair that she had last washed in a clear – albeit chilly – feudal stream. The smell made her a little queasy. Kagome coughed as she climbed to her feet and grabbed the first rung of the ladder.

A sharp pain ran through her hand, and she sucked a quick stream of air through her teeth as she drew back. "Ouch!" she hissed, bringing her hand closer to her face for inspection.

"A goddamn splinter," she said aloud as she plucked it out and winced. "That's just perfect." Kagome huffed in annoyance as she looked up the ladder to the top of the well. It wasn't as if she hadn't contracted a ridiculous number of splinters back in high school – the old well had never been a paragon of good repair – but for some reason, right now, it seemed a particularly petty slap in

the face. She pressed her lips together and shifted her backpack, and then, using only the curved fingers of her injured hand and the full fist of the other, made her way slowly to the top.

When she finally walked into the shrine courtyard, it seemed like she had just left. Nothing much had changed; Goshinboku still stood, great and silent, and the stars – muted and grey now that she was back in her own time – glittered down from the sky while the trees all around the courtyard rustled quietly in the breath of a soft breeze. The lull of tires on pavement reached her ears, and somewhere in the darkness a bird trilled lightly.

It was so... unnatural. Kagome had just spent several weeks tramping around in the wilderness, and now the contrast of concrete and greenery was something of a shock. Goshinboku stood in a circle of stone. It seemed wrong, somehow. Everything seemed wrong. But everything had been wrong in the past as well – there was no Inuyasha and no Sango, or Miroku, or Shippou – and now it was all wrong here. No comrades, no companions... no sweet first love.

Both then and now, the world seemed shattered and poorly glued together, almost as if it was an accident and someone was trying to cover it up. No one was supposed to notice that everything was suddenly off-kilter, but she did. No one was supposed to point out the fault lines suddenly running through her life, the fractured edges where everything had broken apart.

But Kagome could see them.

No. That was then and this was now. Nothing had changed in the present, except that she had missed her exams. She was still the same, except her heart was broken. But that didn't mean the world was different. Shaking herself slightly, Kagome walked across the courtyard and to her house, before sliding the door back and taking her shoes off in the entrance hall. Not knowing what time it was, she didn't want to call out, but it appeared that someone had heard her.

Her mother poked her head out of the kitchen as she peeled her shoes off. "Kagome!" she said brightly. "Welcome home!" As if she had only been at the library. Bright and cheerful, just like when she used to go back and forth

between the worlds. The same, and yet different.

The weight in her heart felt even heavier and Kagome suddenly found she couldn't speak. Finally she settled for a watery smile. "Thank you, Mama," she said quietly.

"Did you have a good time?" her mother asked, although Kagome could see her expression change, into something indefinable, mixed with equal parts concern and protectiveness.

"I had... an interesting time," Kagome replied as she walked into the kitchen. On the table was a pot of tea and a single cup. Her mother was already fetching another one from the cupboard. She gestured to the table.

"Why don't you sit down and tell me about it," she said in a soft voice, and Kagome was already moving to seat herself before she even thought about it.

Sinking to the table, Kagome could feel the tension already draining out of her shoulders. She was home; the lights were cheery yellow and the floor smelled lightly of polish, and in the air the scent of rice and fish was still lingering from dinner. As long as she was here, she could ignore the fractures that ran through her.

Her mother bustled over and settled down across from her, pouring a cup of tea. She handed it to her daughter and leaned her elbows on the table, looking the picture of the concerned and interested mother. "Now," she said, "why don't you start from the beginning," she said, and Kagome remembered.

How may I be of service to you?

There was no fire, but there was tea, and a concerned face, and she thought of Sesshoumaru, and without warning the loneliness hit her so hard she couldn't breathe. She had switched places, except she hadn't, and suddenly Kagome, the kind miko who wandered and who cared for everyone else with innocent affection, felt as though she was the one who had lost everything, who had been cast out, who had wandered the earth and was now a stranger everywhere she went.

And that wasn't the worst of it. The worst part was suddenly realizing that

this horrible, strangling alienation was not unique – it was just like everyone she had known. Just like Shippou, and Sango, and Miroku. Just like Inuyasha. Just like Kikyou, a stranger in her own body. Just like Sesshoumaru, a stranger in his own lands.

Suddenly she wanted to laugh and cry all over again, but most of all she wanted to hide, ashamed. She had presumed to touch them all and give them advice and pretend she knew what they were feeling when she hadn't known anything; surely they had seen through her. They had known. Sweet, naive little miko with her pure, pretty arrows – sweet, naive little Kagome who thought love could conquer all. And now it was her turn.

Kagome looked into her mother's eyes and burst into tears.

* * *

Much later, after an excruciating amount of crying that wracked her body with sobs, and a hot bath that made her cry all over again, Kagome stared up at the ceiling of her room as she lay in bed, and felt so out of place she just wanted to go jump in the well. It wouldn't even matter to her if the well took her back or not – just to be somewhere neither here nor there. It was almost pain to curl up beneath the cool sheets and bury her face in the fluffy pillow beneath her head. It was too much for her to deal with, lying in her childhood room.

She wondered if she'd ever feel at home anywhere again.

Kagome snorted into her pillow. Let's just assume that I won't, she thought to herself, feeling a sliver of cynicism slide into her mind. And while we're at it, let's just assume that I'll never find love or have a family and my career will go nowhere. That way I won't be so disappointed when it happens. Let's expect everyone's death so we won't be surprised. Let's just forget about dreams, because reality never, ever lives up to what you want.

It seemed particularly pessimistic, but at that moment, Kagome didn't care. Inside her was a huge, painful emptiness, and if expecting the worst might lessen it the next time something happened – and there will be a next time, she thought sourly – then by all means she was going to be a pessimist.

Definitely.

Except for that damn hope that was welling up inside her, poking her, telling her that she might still be able to find Shippou, or Sango and Miroku, or Kouga, and why didn't she try the well again? Why, why, why...?

Shut UP, she told herself, turning over in the bed again and shoving her head under the pillow. As if that had ever stopped the voices inside her head – the whispering, promising voices that said maybe she could keep going through the well, and maybe Inuyasha would love her, and maybe she would be happy in the past or he in the future. Maybe, maybe, maybe.

Wrong, wrong, wrong, she thought angrily. None of that happened. Those were all lies, remember?

Except... they hadn't been lies. There was always the pretty word maybe hanging on the end. And that was the tricky thing about hope. It couldn't really let you down, because it had never really promised anything.

That didn't stop her from being angry though. And in the back of her mind, a little bit of determination solidified, and she didn't let it be hopeful; she let it curl around her, and made it her will. Hope had nothing to do with it.

She would go back.

* * *

Hatore had tried to escape, but it turned out that allies were good for something because they had apprehended him and brought him back to the new compound – Sesshoumaru refused to think of it as a fortress or a castle – and put him, in chains, in the middle of the courtyard. He was kneeling but held his head high, as if he had something to be proud of.

"Sesshoumaru," he said when Sesshoumaru walked into the courtyard.

Sesshoumaru said nothing, but thought about all the times he had dreamed of this and wondered why he didn't feel any satisfaction in the victory. His land was his again, and he still felt only anger, although it was a small, cold anger

now, one that made his head ache slightly.

He had found Toukijin and Tenseiga, sitting side by side in a disused and dusty room. It looked like no one had touched them for years, and that was probably the case – Toukijin was too evil, full of hatred and betrayal, and Tenseiga was too useless. Clearly none of them had been able to use it, even though they probably knew the rumors about it. A sword that gave life, and a sword that gave death, and none of the traitors that had taken them had been able to wield the swords properly. It made him darkly pleased to know that. They both sat in their rightful place now.

His borrowed sword was also at his hip, making him feel as though he were some sort of traveling sword vendor. He didn't need three swords, but he couldn't very well let anyone else handle the weapons that were his, nor the weapon that had carried him through battle. It wouldn't have been right.

And now his hated enemy, whose death he had wished for, was kneeling in chains, like the chains Sesshoumaru himself had been bound with, except Sesshoumaru hadn't been killed. Whether out of some twisted compassion, or bizarre honor, or foolish hubris, Sesshoumaru was still alive. But the prince, back in his own kingdom, wouldn't make that mistake. They had thought him weak, but their error would not be his own.

"I will make this quick," Sesshoumaru told him finally.

There was a smile lingering around Hatore's lips. The youkai that had sought to take his place was dark-haired and dark-skinned, but older than himself. There were streaks of grey at his temples, and a line or two on his forehead and around his mouth. He hadn't changed much since Sesshoumaru had last seen him, looking regretful and even a little guilty, but he also remembered that Hatore had pity shining in his eyes as Sesshoumaru was heaved off the cliff and began his long descent into the sea. It made him sick to think of it.

"Just like your father," Hatore said suddenly.

Sesshoumaru only arched a brow, slightly confused but keeping his mask in place.

Hatore chuckled lightly, almost as though he had seen the joke that no one else had. "Honorable," he informed him, another smile tilting the corners of his mouth. "Your father was honorable, even when he was weakening."

Sesshoumaru was insulted. "Weak?" he said icily. The smell of dried blood stirred in his nose.

Snorting, Hatore gave him a sidelong glance. "Well, not now," he amended, amusement coloring his voice.

"No," Sesshoumaru replied. "Not now."

There was a silence before Hatore spoke again. "It will be an honor to die at the hands of such a worthy opponent."

Sesshoumaru drew his sword – his borrowed sword, because even though he had Toukijin, he was not the conqueror yet – and began walking toward the kneeling figure. "Yes. It will."

He suddenly felt very tired; not battle-weary, but bone-weary, as though all his marrow had been drained and replaced with water. There was a time when he would have savored the victory, rolled it around on his tongue like fine sake, but now it just seemed repugnant to him, a necessary duty.

He walked to Hatore's side, and the youkai bowed his head, his hair falling to the side. Sesshoumaru slowly placed the blade against the back of the exposed neck so the muscles would tense and the cut would be clean.

"You know," Hatore suddenly said, conversationally, "I think we really did do you a favor."

Sesshoumaru waited, the cold metal still on warm skin.

"Ridding you of that girl really has made you stronger," Hatore finally said, his words muffled by his chest.

They say that losing someone makes you stronger, came the voice of the miko, Kagome.

"Yes," Sesshoumaru replied.

Hatore chuckled into the ground. "She really was a weakness."

Sesshoumaru laughed his short, sharp laugh.

"No," he said, and brought the blade down, swift and sharp.

And then it was over.

His allies were gathering in the house, where dinner was still laid out and there was plenty of sake to go around, but Sesshoumaru stayed where he was and let his gaze fall on the carnage all around him. The place reeked and he would have to have it cleared out by tomorrow before noon. That shouldn't be a problem – there were still some servants alive, who hadn't fought; Sesshoumaru would have them gather tomorrow at dawn and clear away the dead. And then... he would see.

Slowly, he walked a little way up the mountainside, treading on corpses as he went, until he reached the charred remains of the House of the Moon. He wondered why Hatore had never had them fully removed. Perhaps it was to show that Hatore had been the conqueror, and to remind the youkai and humans around the area what had been done. A warning, of sorts, although the only real warning a traitor needed was that he couldn't be trusted.

He could see the floors and rooms still, mapped out in charred timber and stone, and he felt like he was walking on ghosts.

Sesshoumaru felt troubled. He was still angry, still filled with indescribable melancholy and rage, but there was no one left to pay for Rin's death. No one left in his way; he was free to reclaim his old life. Free to make everything the way it was, but he knew that could never happen.

Rin was avenged. Her spirit could rest in peace, but Sesshoumaru's spirit was still restless, still pacing in the cage of his body. His land had been taken and taken back, but he was just a stranger returning to a house he didn't recognize, in a country that was no longer entirely his. His enemies were dead, his father and mother and brother were dead, and he was all that was left.

He had been alone before, but always by choice, always sought out. Now there was a different quality to it, an extra dimension he'd never really seen before, and it was like a lead weight, dropped through his center, and the phantom feeling of severed companions surrounded him.

He should be celebrating, but instead all he wanted to do was sink down into the ruins, lie in the dew-covered grass, and never get up again.

Sesshoumaru lifted his eyes to the moon. It was still rising in the sky, not even at its zenith, and for the first time he found no comfort there. It was constantly changing, growing, rising, shrinking, falling, and suddenly he felt trapped, suspended again in the void in which he had hung for years, suddenly master of everything and nothing.

Everything had changed, and he remained the same.

Tales from the House of the Moon
by
Resmiranda

Chapter Nine: Interlude

Tales from the House of the Moon:
The Hime and the Inu-Ouji

* * *

The library of Tokyo University was ridiculously dusty, and not for the first

time Kagome wished she had brought a face mask to protect herself from the flying dust motes that seemed to gravitate to her nose, but bygones were bygones. Resolutely, she reached for another scroll, releasing another cloud of dust. Kagome sneezed.

It had been two weeks since she had returned, and she was finally caught up on her work. Since her high school illnesses had almost been a factor in keeping her out of university, it hadn't been difficult for her mother to convince the administration that Kagome was down and out with a horrible case of pneumonia, and she was able to take her midterms when she returned, even though all she really wanted to do was crawl into a hole.

She wasn't feeling much better today as she flipped through centuries of myths and fables, looking for one that might possibly be about her. Kagome couldn't count the number of times she had lain in bed and stared out the window, beating herself up. She should have stayed, should have looked for Sango and Miroku, should have found Shippou. She had let Inuyasha blind her to her friends – again. And now that the well was closed once more, the reality of how much she missed them hit her again.

Kagome felt selfish.

She sighed heavily and grabbed another scroll. She'd looked through so many that they were all beginning to blend together; the fables were so similar that it was almost impossible to tell if she had read this one or that one. Titles flew by, each of them just as nondescript and opaque as the last one – The Mirror of Matsuyama, The Two Frogs, The Lord of the Land, and The Descent from Heaven. Some of them were familiar, while others she had never heard of before; it didn't really matter, since after a while they all began to blur in her mind. Kagome felt a headache coming on.

Slowly she unrolled the scroll in front of her and smoothed it with the backs of her hands – Tenaeda-sensei, beaming cherubically, had cautioned her against touching valuable old scrolls with her fingers or palms because the oils and

sweat released could damage the paper and the ink – and began to read.

It was slow going – the language wasn't exactly archaic since the scroll had been made at the turn of the century, just a little difficult to read – but as she practiced Kagome found herself getting into the flow of the words. Stories about kitsunes and stonecutters and Sea Kings rolled by beneath her eyes, and Kagome may well have spaced out until something caught her eye.

Inu.

Just a tiny word, and yet it crashed into her like a sack of bricks. Kagome bent over further and squinted at the text of the extremely short fable, reading the title in a soft whisper.

"The Hime and the Inu-Ouji..." she breathed. Quickly she glanced at the approximate dates for the supposed genesis of the fairytale: 1590-1620.

The Dog Prince. Sesshoumaru.

Irrationally, Kagome felt annoyed, and a little betrayed. It was the ghost of an emotion, light and airy, just a shimmering shadow of the way it felt to know that Inuyasha and Kikyou had moved on with their lives – together – while she had been left behind to linger in a love that wasn't meant to be.

But that was ridiculous. She half wanted to close the scroll and move on, but curiosity grabbed her, made her pay attention.

Gritting her teeth, Kagome shoved the feeling aside, and began to read.

'Once there was a beautiful princess by the name of Machiko. She was known

far and wide for her beauty, and her kindness and compassion made her even more beautiful in the eyes of her suitors. But she turned them all away, preferring instead to stay with her father and mother in their castle by the western sea. She was an only child, and doted on with much care and love.

'One day as Machiko was out on her father's lands, she strayed from her party and found herself lost in the woods. At first she was calm and called for help, but as all around her the sounds of the forest gradually pressed down upon her, she was filled with dread. Fearing for her life, she began to run.

'She was beautiful and fleet of foot, like a deer, but her fear blinded her to the danger, and Machiko found her ankles snagged by tree roots and she fell to the earth, crying piteously.

'It came to pass that the prince of dogs was strolling through the forest and heard her weeping. Moved by her sad tears he ran swiftly to her aide, but when he reached her he was struck dumb by her beauty, and he picked her up and dried her eyes. He kissed her in the darkness of the forest and made her his own, and she was so grateful that he had come to her and so awed by his presence that she gladly went to him.'

Kagome stopped reading and shook her head, trying to suppress the blush that was creeping over her face. She wondered how she would feel if hundreds of years in the future people were reading about her sexual indiscretions with demons in the woods. Not to mention that Sesshoumaru wasn't bad to look at, but he was such a jerk most of the time that she couldn't imagine any pampered princess wanting to be… ah… "made his own." Or perhaps he wasn't a jerk to pretty girls in the woods.

Kagome found herself becoming more and more annoyed with the story, and inexplicably more and more miserable with her life. She pressed her lips into a thin line and continued reading.

'When Machiko was finally found, she told no one of her adventure, but it soon became apparent that she was with child, and was forced to admit her indecencies.

'Her father and mother were horrified, and insisted she give up the child, but Machiko was firm. She would not leave her baby to the elements. She cried and pleaded with her parents but they remained implacable. Her child would be a hanyou and unable to take on the succession. For the honor of the family, she would have to kill the child.

'Machiko wept bitterly and laid awake many nights, searching for a solution.

'And it came to pass that a wandering miko was passing through the north – '

Kagome stopped, feeling ridiculous and sad at the same time.

...a wandering miko...

She felt like banging her head against something very hard and immovable. A miko, again. And it was probably her. She was like an annoying satellite, revolving around Sesshoumaru's stupid life, fixing his mistakes and then being relegated to a footnote in the pages of history. She wanted to scream.

'And it came to pass that a wandering miko was passing through the north, and one night Machiko, heavy with child, made the journey to visit her and seek her counsel.

'The miko listened, quietly and compassionately, to the tragic story of Machiko. When the hime had finished, the miko laid a hand on her belly and told her the baby would be strong, and healthy, and would be a joy.

'"I will seek the father of your child," the miko assured her, "and he will know his son. Be at peace."

'When the hime heard these words, she was calmed. She rose and returned to her home by the sea, and in three days time she gave birth to a baby boy with a full head of hair and a powerful cry and the tail of a dog.

'The prince of the dogs, hearing that his son was born, returned to her side by the sea and took his son and brought him back to the north, where he was reared to be strong and powerful.

'Machiko, on the other hand, bereft of her child, refused to ever love another, and lingered on the shore of her home, weeping for her baby, and for the man who left her, for the remainder of her days.'

There the story ended.

Kagome frowned and sat back, barely refraining from scratching her head. The silence in the old, dusty rooms was oppressive.

"That was it?" she finally said aloud. "That's what I've been looking for?" Immediately she felt silly for talking to herself even though the library was empty, but she couldn't shake the feeling of disbelief. It was like looking for a treasure and when the chest was finally opened, all that was in it were bolts of cloth. Pretty, and probably valuable, but not what she was looking for.

And Kagome could help but have the feeling that there was something wrong with the story, too, something not quite right. She felt like someone had remembered it incorrectly, or she was remembering it differently than the way it had been recorded, but that was impossible.

But it didn't matter, did it? She had found what she wanted – another fairytale that she might be a part of, another gateway to the past, to the friends who might still be alive. The presence of the Dog Prince and the miko almost guaranteed that she was meant to leap through the well again.

It was almost a duty, then, wasn't it? The thought made her feel better.

Kagome drew out her notebook and carefully copied the story into it so she would know what to do before clearing up the mess she had made and walking down the stairs to the ground floor and out the front door.

For the first time in weeks, her heart felt light again, and in her mind's eye she created a world, after her duty was done, in which she found Sango and Miroku and Shippou and they laughed and embraced and she wouldn't be lonely any longer.

Tales from the House of the Moon
by
Resmiranda

Chapter Ten

"There is nothing like returning to a place that remains unchanged to find the ways in which you yourself have altered." -- Nelson Mandela

* * *

Two months later, after her final exams had been sweated over and passed with flying colors, after graduation had been squared away, after she had

turned down a job offer and been accepted to graduate school, Kagome woke up, walked into the bathroom to wash her face, and found Kikyou staring at her from the prison of the mirror.

Kagome shrieked, the soap squirting out of her hand to skitter across the floor as she flung her arms up in defense. She nearly broke the glass before she realized that Kikyou was wearing 20th century pajamas, looked as frightened as she felt, and had a serious case of bed-head.

"Nee-chan?"

Kagome looked up to see Souta peering around the edge of the door. "What's wrong? Did you hurt yourself?" he asked, his voice laden with concern.

Averting her eyes from the mirror and trying to calm her frantic panting, Kagome shook her head. "No! No, I – I just, um... was startled, that's all," she reassured him, running a shaking hand through her hair and leaving a soapy streak behind. Not what I meant to do, she thought with chagrin as a thick lock clung to her fingers. Now I have to wash it.

Souta looked unconvinced. "What could have startled you? Did you see a spider?"

For half a second, Kagome almost seized on the convenient excuse, but in the end she decided it would just be best to let everyone know she was crazy. Maybe they'd lock her up and she wouldn't be so stressed. "No. I, uh, looked in the mirror and thought someone else was there," she told him. She still didn't look at the glass hanging over the sink.

Souta frowned. "Like, you saw someone behind you, or you thought your reflection was someone else?"

Kagome sighed as she disentangled her fingers from her hair. Stupid soap, she mentally grumbled. "I thought I was someone else for a moment."

Souta broke into a grin. "Oooh, that's creepy. I wish that would happen to me."

She gave him an exasperated look as she shook the last strands from her hand. "It wasn't fun," she told him. "It was scary."

"So who was it?"

Oh, just my past incarnation. "No one, just someone different," she said.

Souta looked disappointed. "Oh well. That's too bad. I thought you might have turned into someone pretty," he said slyly, clearly under the impression that he was being clever.

"OUT!" Kagome yelled, hurling a wet wash cloth at him. It hit the doorframe and he ducked out, snickering. Kagome slammed the door behind him. Apparently little brothers never grew out of teasing their older sisters, even boys as inherently quiet and shy as Souta.

She stood and stared at the door for a moment, letting her heartbeat return to normal. Her limbs were shaking very slightly, the way they did after a fight or after someone made her angry; the adrenaline in her system had nowhere to go and was forcing her into a case of the jitters, a state that Kagome found extremely annoying.

Although not nearly as annoying as waking up and finding out you've become someone else. The thought filled her with a vague sense of fascinated horror. She slowly turned toward the mirror again.

She didn't look so much like Kikyou this time, but the resemblance was stronger than she'd ever seen. Extending a hand, Kagome ran it down the face of the girl in the mirror that looked similar to Kikyou, but not quite the same. It had always been that way, of course, but the resemblance was so much more striking now. Kagome squinted and her reflection blurred a little bit and suddenly she was Kagome again.

She stopped squinting, frowned, and leaned closer. The quirk of her mouth was still the same, and the hair was still just a little fluffier and more unmanageable, but there was something else. Kagome brought her other hand to her face and ran a feather light touch over her eyes, feeling the papery quality of the skin beneath them and the slightly oily texture of her eyelids. She blinked slowly and refocused. There. There was a change in her eyes – a hint of something lonely and stricken – that spoke more of the dead miko than her living counterpart. Something sad in her eyes, an echo of something lost

that was always more characteristic of Kikyou than herself.

I was always the happy one.

Kagome wondered if it had been gradual or sudden. After all, how often does one really look at herself in the mirror? What would Inuyasha say if he saw me now?

Watching herself as she did so, Kagome traced the curve of her nose and the arch of her brows, trying to decide why she looked so much like Kikyou now when she hadn't before. It didn't make any sense.

Deeply troubled, Kagome bent over the sink and splashed cold water over her face. Unconsciously, she scrubbed a little harder than usual, as if she could wash out the resemblance. As she turned off the light when she left the bathroom, a thought flashed across her mind, and she wondered if she left behind a shade of herself – of Kikyou – in the mirror even as she passed out of the room. Stopping in her tracks, she stood outside the door before slowly reaching back inside and turning the light on again. It was rude to leave someone in the dark, after all.

Kagome tried to shake off her shadowy notions as she went to her closet and unearthed her own traditional clothes – a pair of black hakama and a thick haori that she hadn't worn since middle school – to pack away. Today was the day she had decided on; she was going to try the well again. Before, she hadn't had the luxury of deciding when to return, but that all changed; now that she was just a free-floating character in myth she felt it afforded her a certain degree of freedom. After all, it was the well that had decided to spit her out where it did, and it could damn well determine where she needed to go from here.

Idly, she wondered how many years had passed since her last visit. Chances were growing slim that Miroku and Sango were still alive, but the tiny flame of hope that she had harbored for those years between departing and returning still burned. They'd be old, but that wouldn't matter, right? They would still be her friends, and she missed them terribly. It was too late for Inuyasha, but she could still salvage something.

She was more certain that Shippou was still alive, although his appearance

now might be different – how quickly did kitsune age, anyway? Either way, she wanted to find them again. If she could go back, she would do her best.

"Kagome?"

Looking up, Kagome was mildly surprised to find her mother standing in her doorway. "Yes, mama?" she asked brightly, placing a piece of folded clothing in her backpack. They'd be wrinkled when she retrieved them, but she made a valiant effort to keep them neat anyway.

Kagome watched as her mother frowned slightly before stepping into the room, quietly shutting the door behind her. There was an expression clouding her features that could only be described as sad and a little wishful. Kagome tilted her head, puzzled. "Mama?"

"You are going back today," her mother stated as she leaned back against the door.

Kagome nodded.

"I wish you wouldn't, Kagome."

Kagome was taken aback. "Wh – what?" she stammered. Her mother had never really expressed any sort of reservation about her time-traveling. She wondered what had changed her mind.

Her mother just gave her a look so knowing that it took Kagome's breath away. It was as though her mother knew something and she didn't, something about Kagome herself, something only mothers know. If she did, she was doing better than Kagome herself. How about letting me in on the secret? Kagome thought.

"I wish you wouldn't go," her mother said again. "It's dangerous."

Kagome gave a disbelieving laugh. "It was more dangerous when I was in junior high," she said. "I'll be fine!"

But her mother shook her head. "Not that kind of danger," she said quietly.

"What do you mean?"

Waving a hand as though she could pluck the answer out of thin air, her mother looked away. "I mean... you can't live your life there."

Kagome sighed in relief. "I know that," she replied, smiling and stuffing another piece of clothing into her backpack. "I just want to see my friends again, and I feel like I have a duty to do these things. You know? Like if I don't do it, no one will. You know," she continued conversationally, trying to ignore the odd mix of relief and panic that flooded her as she tried to make room in the side of her backpack for the first aid kit, "Ayumi-chan told me that if you don't do something you were supposed to do in the past – well, by time-traveling, like if you know you're supposed to do something and you don't – that you create a rift in the space-time continuum and you destroy the very fabric of reality. I'm not sure what that means, but – "

"Kagome."

She stopped mid-ramble.

Her mother smiled softly. "I know. I just don't want you to be so caught up in what you want to happen that what does happen will take you by surprise. I know you want to see your friends again, but if you live your whole life hoping to just have one more time with them, where does that leave you?"

Kagome felt her shoulders slump, just a little, and she looked away. "I don't know, Mama. I'm just..."

Her mind searched for the right words, but found none. How could she explain to her mother how weird everything around her seemed? How could she put into words the knowledge that no one in the world knew what it meant to have traveled back through time. No one else understood what it meant to lose someone to the past quite the same way she did, and all her life she would be different, without compare, and without companion. No one would ever really know what she felt like, no matter how much she loved or how much they loved her. Little Kagome, who thought love could conquer everything. Except it can't conquer this. Wearily, Kagome passed a hand across her forehead, as though trying to erase her cherished memories.

"I'm lonely."

Soft footsteps fell on the carpet as her mother moved across the floor to kneel beside her. "I know, Kagome. I know." Kagome felt the heavy, sweet settling of her mother's arm around her shoulder, and high in her nose she felt the sting of unshed tears.

She'd cried so much in these past weeks, and something in her rebelled, almost violently. In her lap, she clenched her fists. I'm tired of crying, she thought, and so she didn't. She just rested her head on her mother's shoulder and breathed in her comforting scent – soft talc and a hint of rose perfume – and let it soothe her, calm her soul, resurrect her memories of childhood. She wished the answers were as easy as they were then. Even when she was crying for her first love, the answer had seemed simple. Be who you are, be happy for the time you have.

But it didn't seem that simple anymore, and maybe it never had been.

After a moment, her mother pulled away and Kagome sighed deeply, reaching for another item to put in her pack. Kagome wondered if in that moment, caught in the circle of her mother's arms, she had lost something, but it didn't feel like it. Her mother ran a hand through her hair before standing.

"Just come back safe to me, all right?"

Kagome smiled. "I will, Mama."

When she finally leapt into the past only a scant half-hour later, her mother was there to see her off. From the fierce circle of her arms, Kagome suddenly wanted to go, to leave this place where she was loved but not understood, and she didn't even look back as she made the heart-stopping leap of faith into the well.

When she finally felt the magic catch, Kagome breathed again. Suspended in the blue light of time, she finally felt at home with no one else around.

* * *

One grey winter morning Sesshoumaru awoke in the House of the Moon, and found that, for the first time in ten years, he didn't want to tear it to the ground.

It was so strange to him to be so suddenly bereft of one of his most familiar emotions that he nearly went back to sleep, certain that he had to be dreaming. He even went so far as to close his eyes on the theory that when he woke up the angry compulsion would return, but after fifteen minutes of floating on the surface of sleep he opened them again and stared at the ceiling that he didn't want to dismantle, piece by piece.

Sesshoumaru blinked before bringing a hand to his face and inspecting it closely through narrowed eyes. The stripes on his wrists were the same. The claws were sharp, the skin pale and smooth, and the blood that ran beneath the skin smelled like his own. Carefully he probed his face with the hand and found everything to be in the correct place.

So, he thought, a little groggily, I didn't turn into anyone else in the middle of the night. Excellent. Good to know. He allowed himself the faintest of smiles; one theory already tested and dismissed and he hadn't even risen from his bed yet. He was doing well today.

Slowly he sat up and propped his elbows on his knees and weaving his hands through his hair. He let the tips of his claws massage his scalp as he slowly passed his hand across the crown, trying to soothe away the pain that wasn't there. After a few moments of this futile exercise, Sesshoumaru rose to his feet and padded across the cold wooden floors to the wall. Stretching out his hand he lightly ran his fingertips over the wood, letting the seams catch his skin. His fingers didn't twitch with the suppressed desire to leak poison and melt the timbers in front of him. He drew back and looked at his hand in confusion.

Around him, the walls of the castle settled into the ground in their old positions. After his victory, he'd ordered it laid out the way it was before, against the memory of it scorched into the mountainside, and when it was finished he had strolled in through the front gates expecting – what? Not the wave of nostalgia that hit him, surely, nor the sudden longing that only his pride kept from his stoic face. He had wanted to tear it apart right then and there, but the expense was too great, and the labor from his reclaimed youkai vassals had been too loving for him to do such a thing. And yet there hadn't

been a day since the House of the Moon had been rebuilt that he hadn't wanted to burn it himself. The walls had been witness to none of it – the quiet, cheerful whisper of servants, the squawking attentiveness of Jaken, the echoing laughter of Rin – but the house was filled with ghosts all the same.

He hated that castle, and he dragged himself through his days, letting the rage that bubbled underneath the surface fuel him. He squashed rebellions with impunity, destroyed whoever got in his way, negotiated harshly; he went to bed every night exhausted and resentful, and the next day he would do it again. Day in, day out, the same things over and over, and always the chill of fury beneath his skin.

Except today. Today, his resentment against the prison of memories had dissipated, leaving nothing behind.

Sesshoumaru dropped his hand to his side where it hung uselessly. Experimentally he flexed it, wondering why it felt so empty. Well, it felt empty because it was empty, but there was something else to it. He squeezed his hand shut as hard as he could and found that his strength was still there, but it was as though there was no use for it any longer.

His mouth twisted with displeasure. His whole body felt useless, even weak, as though his bones were bags of sand, unable to hold shape or provide support. His mind felt empty as well, as if he was supposed to be doing something but was not. Something was wrong, or needed to be fixed, and he had forgotten – or worse, never even known – what it was.

Slowly Sesshoumaru divested himself of his sleeping garments and dressed himself for the day, marveling at the novelty that was this feeling of aimlessness. After a few moments in which he stood, half-dressed, in the middle of his room and turned it over and over inside his mind, Sesshoumaru arrived at the conclusion that it wasn't the same as when he wandered in the East in exile. That had been an endless spiral downwards into darkness, and shadows filled his days. He had been swollen with an excess of sorrow; it was like a noise so loud and blaring that he had grown numb and insensate to any feeling at all, and he had remained that way until the miko – Kagome, his mind supplied – had taken a lance and sliced him open with her words.

This feeling, he determined as he shrugged into his haori, was different and

yet the same. He could still feel sadness all around him, but it was an abstract sort of sadness, without color or form. Instead of feeling numb, which was a feeling in and of itself, he just felt... nothing. There was an absence of feeling – not because he was avoiding emotion or consequence, not because he was so bombarded that he had become inured to it, but because he simply didn't have a reaction. There was nothing there, except an itch at the base of his spine that made him squirm inside his body. There was a restless quality to it, urging him to move.

Still, there was nothing for it except to go on with his day and see if his driving force came back. Sesshoumaru settled Toukijin and Tenseiga at his hip, made last minute adjustments to his armor, and stepped out of his chambers. Turning he walked down the corridors that didn't resonate with memory before turning into the room where he held his morning briefing.

Sesshoumaru sat down at the low table and was neither comfortable nor uncomfortable, neither at home nor at odds. He wanted to get up and pace; he wanted to leave and not return. With difficulty, he refrained from placing a hand on his forehead to determine if he had a fever.

There was only one advisor in front of him today, and Sesshoumaru couldn't remember his name. Siryuu, was it? Perhaps it was Sinyuu... Regardless, the fact that there was only one meant that today would be a slow day, with nothing much to do, and in front of him Sesshoumaru could feel time unreeling, pale and empty. He listened with half an ear as the advisor – Sanzo? or Seinzo? – detailed the state of his domain. No rebellions, no troublesome youkai threatening villages, no disputes and no allies pestering him with troubles in their own lands. It was a wholly unremarkable day, and there was nothing for him to do. The phantom itch at the base of his spine grew in intensity; he wanted to leap outside his own body. It was winter, when he should want nothing more than to be ensconced inside his warm castle, but something sang in his bones, reached through his chest and grabbed a heartstring, and pulled. The advisor continued on, oblivious.

Finally Sesshoumaru cut him off in mid-recitation. "Is Myouga here?" he asked abruptly.

The advisor, whose name was actually Shirin and who hated to be interrupted, teetered on a mental precipice for a moment before righting himself.

"I – I beg milord's pardon?" he asked.

Sesshoumaru sighed impatiently. "Is Myouga in the castle today?" he demanded again. He couldn't remember the last time he had spoken to the flea; all his recent memories seemed to bleed into one another, unlike the past which stood out sharp and clear.

Shirin struggled for footing. "I believe so, milord, but I don't see why – "

"Send him in," Sesshoumaru commanded before turning his face away, indicating that he was finished with the briefing.

"Yes, milord," Shirin said before bowing and leaving the room at a hurried pace.

Sesshoumaru stared at the wall that he didn't hate and waited for Myouga to make his appearance.

This was how Myouga found himself rudely poked awake – far earlier than he usually arose, he observed grumpily – and rushed down a maze of corridors to the briefing chambers. Outside the door the little flea stretched and tried to shake the bad dreams out of his head before bounding inside as energetically as his old bones would allow. Hopping up on the table, he landed in front of Sesshoumaru, cleared his throat, and announced his presence. "Sesshoumaru-sama!" he called, "What do you wish of me?"

The demon lord turned away from the wall and looked down at his old servant. He narrowed his eyes and leaned closer, causing slight heart stutters in the old flea.

"What on earth are you wearing?" Sesshoumaru asked, a touch of incredulity in his voice.

Myouga squirmed. "I was sleeping, milord," he replied, a shade reproachfully, tying his kimono tighter and feeling naked.

Sesshoumaru merely arched an eyebrow.

Myouga crossed his arms. "I didn't know if the situation was urgent or not. This is what you get when you wake me up!"

"I see." Sesshoumaru supposed that, had he ever stopped to think about it, it was perfectly logical for Myouga, now a highly positioned servant, to have a few new changes of tiny flea-sized clothes. Even clothes for sleeping in, an activity that for some reason he had assumed the flea never did.

Shifting uncomfortably under the demon lord's gaze, Myouga wondered if Sesshoumaru knew how like his father he appeared. Finally he spoke, just to break the silence. "Did... did you want something, milord?"

For a moment Sesshoumaru seemed a little lost and uncertain, but it passed so quickly Myouga wondered if he'd even seen the expression flicker across his face. "I have decided to travel," Sesshoumaru announced.

"Ah," Myouga said, trying not to act surprised. When no further information seemed forthcoming, he cleared his throat and attempted to sound wise. "Traveling is always a good idea when the burden of ruling becomes too much," he declared, hoping it sounded as sage out loud as it did in his head.

Sesshoumaru quirked his other eyebrow, a gesture Myouga was certain he used for the sole purpose of making servants uncomfortable. "Are you saying that I am a poor leader?" he asked imperiously.

Panic. "No!" Myouga immediately amended. "No, what I meant to say was, er, sometimes it's good to get away."

"Yes," Sesshoumaru agreed.

"Your father would take, ah, extended constitutionals as well."

"Really?"

"Yes. He always said it cleared his mind."

Sesshoumaru thought about this for a moment. He didn't really need to have his mind cleared – it seemed empty enough as it was – but it might help to find some sort of focus. Perhaps he needed time away to think.

"I see," Sesshoumaru said again.

There was a pause. "And... where will you be going?" Myouga asked after a moment.

For almost a minute, Sesshoumaru appeared to ponder the question. "Out," he finally answered.

"Just... out?"

"Yes."

Myouga gave up. "What would you like me to do then, milord?"

Very faintly, the demon lord smiled. It was just a quirk of his lip, but it looked very out of place on his usually stoic facade. Myouga found he didn't like it very much. "You shall accompany me," he said lightly.

Myouga decided that this sounded dangerous. "But... my lord, I am a terrible traveling companion! I am quite, quite allergic to it!" he informed his lord almost desperately. Visions of battle and blood went through his mind and sweat broke out on his forehead.

Sesshoumaru sniffed. "The only thing you are allergic to is courage," he informed his old retainer.

"No," Myouga corrected him. "I am allergic to dying, and, pardon me, my lord, but it seems very likely that while traveling with you a situation will occur in which I would be in imminent danger of passing over."

"I like those situations," Sesshoumaru said.

"I know," Myouga answered despondently and let himself slump a little. It had been a long time since his lord had decided to do anything like this, but there was a gleam in his eye that said he was not to be dissuaded. The old flea was fond of saying that he couldn't see into the future, only the past, but since everything had already happened anyway it was just as good as fortune telling. Right now he wished he didn't know what was going to happen, but it didn't

matter. The future was crystal clear, bright and pretty and probably filled with incident in which he, Myouga, would be put into grave danger while his lord – like his father before him – simply stretched his legs and yawned.

"Good," Sesshoumaru replied. "Get ready. We depart before midday."

"So soon?" Myouga asked, aghast. His tiny fingers fiddled with the tie to his kimono. "But who will take care of things while you are away?" he said, hoping against hope that he would be left behind to tend to household matters.

Sesshoumaru didn't disappoint, merely shrugged nonchalantly as he stood and turned to exit the room. "I trust you to see to that. And put some clothes on."

Myouga sighed. It was going to be a long day.

Tales from the House of the Moon
by
Resmiranda

Chapter Eleven

"Very few things happen at the right time, and the rest do not happen at all. The conscientious historian will correct these defects." -- Herodotus

* * *

Strangely, now that she was trapped inside her own folly, Kagome wondered why she hadn't seen it. The myth crowded her inside her mind, shoving out the fact that she felt like she was dying.

...She was beautiful and fleet of foot, like a deer, but her fear blinded her to the danger, and Machiko found her ankles snagged by tree roots and she fell to the earth, crying piteously...

...It came to pass that the prince of dogs was strolling through the forest and heard her weeping. Moved by her sad tears he ran swiftly to her aide, but when he reached her he was struck dumb by her beauty, and he picked her up and dried her eyes. He kissed her in the darkness of the forest and made her his own, and she was so grateful that he had come to her and so awed by his presence that she gladly went to him...

She'd loved fairytales when she was younger. The tales of enchantment and beauty, so full of love and passion had always excited her. Kagome had always wanted to live in one, where she was rescued by a prince and crafted into a princess, and where beauty and goodness went hand in hand.

If she'd known that fairytales were just big, fat lies, she would never have jumped into the well a second time.

Stupid, stupid fairytales, she thought.

Kagome was sitting with her hand on her foot in the middle of a cold forest. Her nose was running and her teeth were chattering, and Sesshoumaru was standing stock still at the edge of the clearing, gazing at her with those piercing golden eyes. She desperately wanted to know what he was thinking.

Here I am, Kagome thought giddily. This is me, sitting on the ground in the past. This is me, in the woods, with an ankle the size of a softball. This is me, sock in hand, twigs in hair, a stinking bear carcass ten feet away, and a cold. A great, stuffy cold and god, this ankle hurts.

And there he is. The thought flashed across her brain as though she were trying to give it no more weight than a simple observation, not entirely unlike, "the sky is blue," or "it appears that my pants are on fire," or "I am going to lose my virginity to a dog demon four hundred years in the past."

That stupid myth had got it all wrong. She was a miko, she had no family, and she wasn't pretty or kind. In fact, she was feeling extraordinarily cranky for someone who was apparently about to get laid. Kagome had never had sex, but at this very moment with the weight of history bearing down on her all she could think about was his hair, falling around her like silver waters. And sex. She wondered what both would feel like, and she wondered how many

bruises she would get from the tree roots she was sitting on. The fever must be really getting to me, she thought.

It had been nearly a minute since he had first appeared and Sesshoumaru was still standing there – just standing and staring seemed to be his favorite pastime, she mentally grumbled – and Kagome decided, right then and there, that if she ever got home she was going to burn the university library to the ground.

She was regretting a good many things as well. Why couldn't she have slept with a nice boy who was studying to be a doctor? Why couldn't she have just stayed at home where things weren't so weird and dangerous? Why was her first sexual experience going to be on the dirty ground four hundred years away from where she belonged with a murdering demon and hot breath on her ear and the aching slide of tongues on skin and hair like silken water pooling on –

Kagome realized she was getting sidetracked and gritted her teeth. Stupid, stupid Sesshoumaru and his stupid, stupid pretty hair, she thought angrily. This is all his stupid fault.

Briefly, Kagome wondered how she had arrived at this point. Of course, now it all seemed so logical. Of course she was going to get knocked up in the woods by her ambiguous enemy, if only because it was the worst possible thing that could happen. Bad things liked happening to her. They'd been happening since she'd landed, less than a week ago, in the past.

The shrine was now built, and as such there had been an initial moment of panic when Kagome realized that she had landed inside a building and thought that the well wouldn't let her through. She was quickly disabused of that notion when a young girl – younger than herself, even, and dressed in miko garb – came barging into the well house and attempted to shoot her full of arrows as Kagome clambered out of the well and landed inside the newly built shrine. It was a good thing she was a lousy shot or Kagome would have found herself better ventilated than she had ever wanted to be.

"Stop! I'm Kagome!" she'd cried, saying the first thing that came to her mind.

"Well, damn it!" the miko had exclaimed and thrown her bow at the wall. "I

hate archery!"

Kagome, crouching on the floor, hadn't known what to say to that. "You'll get better?" she said finally. Then the miko had burst into tears.

In the most inauspicious start to a journey yet, Kagome had found herself carrying a sobbing girl back to her hut. If she'd known that the beginning had been indicative of how the rest of her quest would go she would have turned around and gone home right then. Ungifted with the power to see the future, she had stayed.

Sinayo was dead. It hadn't been a surprise, but Kagome felt unhappy about it all the same. She felt like she had brushed past a ghost on her way to do something more important; it was as if Sinayo had only wheeled into her life to serve a purpose, and now that the purpose was done she was gone. After the initial excitement of introducing herself all around again she had curled up underneath her thin blanket – she hadn't known it would be winter and was regretting not grabbing warmer clothes – and felt a twinge of guilt. Sinayo had passed in and out of her life and now she would never see her again.

It was difficult to classify the feeling. It wasn't the same as when she thought of Inuyasha, but it was similar, though more tinged with guilt. Kagome felt as though she'd brushed away an entire life without knowing it, and now it was just a tumbling shadow in her memory that passed through her skin and out again.

When she woke up the next day, Kagome had contracted a cold and the new miko, whose name turned out to be, weirdly enough, Kagura, was cooking up something hot over the fire.

"Eat up!" she'd said as she ladled the thick soup into a bowl. "I'm a bad cook, but my stew isn't too bad and you've got a quest ahead of you!"

Kagome had frowned as she accepted the bowl. "How do you know that?" she asked the miko. She couldn't bring herself to think of this little girl as Kagura; Kagura had died before she had lived, long ago.

The miko had shrugged and grinned. "Just a guess!" she'd said happily. "Besides, when you come to our time, you always have to go on a quest. Sinayo

told me that."

"I see," Kagome had said as she took a sip of stew, which tasted atrocious. She swallowed anyway – the heat felt good on her throat and the pungent taste opened up her sinuses. Kagome tried to distract herself from the horrible concoction by listening as the miko prattled on.

"I'll give you provisions and things if you need them," she was saying. "We have dried fish and rice and such. Oh, and a bow you can borrow – you could have mine, I hate archery – and maybe an extra change of clothes..."

"How long since I was last here?" Kagome cut in after a minute of this. The miko stopped talking and looked at the ceiling, counting on her fingers.

"Hmm," she had said speculatively. "Lets see... Sinayo died last year, and two years before that was the blight, and there was that outbreak the year before that... or was that the same year...? Hang on, let me think! I'll get it eventually!"

Kagome had wondered, uncharitably, if the miko was defective. She seemed to be lacking the fundamental filter in her brain that prevented normal people from saying whatever crossed their minds. After almost a minute of the miko's chatter Kagome wanted to shoot her, but was able to determine that she was only ten years ahead of her last visit.

It had been a relief when she had left, striking out in the vague direction that she thought was northwest. The miko had wanted to accompany her, but Kagome had declined even though it seemed no one else wished to be her guide. Kagome didn't mind terribly much; she may have been vaguely lost, but at least she wasn't buried under a mountain of words any longer.

Except it was cold and windy and the forest was dark and starting a fire was difficult and Kagome longed for company. Her head hurt most of the time and her nose was like a faucet that she couldn't turn off. She found that, on the cold roads that sometimes all but disappeared into the undergrowth, her memories clustered in closer, and she would find herself lost in melancholy thought. She was lonely.

And there were the bears. Kagome felt that she had been quite inconvenienced in the bear department since she thought bears hibernated all winter, but this

was apparently not the case. Perhaps the food had been scarce in the summer, or perhaps she was just grossly misinformed about bears, but the fact remained that she had been forced to shoot not one but two bears in the past five days of trekking northwest. The first had been depressingly easy to kill and had fallen quickly to her arrows. The second one, on the other hand, was a real bastard.

About two seconds was all it had taken for the bear to cross the clearing to her campsite, and the arrow she put into its shoulder didn't slow it down very much. It took less time than the space of a thought for her to turn her heels and take off into the darkness of the forest, the flight instinct too strong for her to stand her ground.

A few crowded minutes later – branches tugging her hair and clothes, the cold air burning in her throat, and always the lumbering sound of pursuit behind her – and a bright pain lanced through her leg. Kagome went down, stars in her eyes, and an arrow in her hand. She'd turned, breathlessly, and shot it behind her.

When her vision cleared, there was a panting, dying bear only three meters away, an arrow straight through its eye. It didn't take long for it to die.

And then she was alone in the middle of a dark forest, with only the vaguest of notions how to get back to her campsite, a cold, a twisted foot, and the temperature dropping rapidly.

Kagome let out a stream of curses so loud and vile that Inuyasha would have been proud. Or shocked. Neither for the first nor the last time, she wished he was there.

Gingerly she'd dislodged her foot from the crevice in which it was wedged and peeled off the sock covering it. Her ankle was already swelling, but a quick inspection had revealed that she had only sprained it, which was a silver lining even if she wasn't feeling terribly disposed to appreciate it. Muttering under her breath, Kagome had begun to stretch the sock out so she could use it as a makeshift bandage.

That was how she found herself in this horrible position; she was still cursing and hissing with the pain and missing Inuyasha and Sango and Miroku so

badly that she thought she would die when she caught the youki on the air. And then she had looked up to see Sesshoumaru standing there, a look of either extreme boredom or intense interest on his face. All she could think about was how she was suddenly speared through the heart by a story, made to do its cruel whim. She didn't want to do this, here, in the cold beneath a tree in a time where she didn't belong. It was like one of those cheesy romance scenes in the books that her friend Eri-chan used to read behind her history books in class. Nerves, adrenaline, and fear warred with each other, and Kagome bit her lip.

In the silent moments that stretched between them in the dark winter night, Kagome thought she heard the universe laughing.

Then she sneezed.

It was the sneeze that startled Sesshoumaru out of his small reverie. He had been wondering why it didn't seem strange to him to run into her again; in his sleep he'd heard her hauntingly familiar voice in the quiet of the night uttering the most creative curses he'd witnessed aside from his brother's lexicon, and when he'd finally pried his eyes open and caught her scent on the air it seemed only natural that he would come to investigate.

Seeing her, disheveled and afraid at the base of a tree with the corpse of a bear only a few feet away, had given him pause, though. She appeared to be injured. He stared at her, and she at him; she looked very young in those moments, and in his chest there was that strange tug, so very like the tug that caused him to abandon the House of the Moon in the dead of winter.

He'd been wandering for less than one cycle of the moon, but he hadn't yet found whatever it was he was looking for. He wondered if this miko – Kagome, he remembered – would know what it was he sought.

She looked like a tapestry; like a painting on a screen, in shadow and light, in blue and black. He remembered her well, as he was certain only very few left in this world remembered her, and he knew she remembered him. There was a strange comfort in that fact; human though she may be, her memory still held him after all those years.

When she sneezed, he caught the slight odor of disease. So, she was sick as

well. An unfamiliar feeling of consternation swept over him as he remembered all the times Rin had let herself fall ill. Just what the hell did she think she was doing alone in the middle of nowhere, sick and injured? He crossed the clearing to stand in front of her.

"Kagome – " she jumped a little at the sound of her name, " — what are you doing here?"

Wide eyes stared up at him, and her face was washed and pale from the light of the moon high above them. She opened her mouth to speak, but it was too dry. Closing it, she swallowed, licked her lips, and tried again.

"I don't know," she answered. "I'm a miko, not a hime."

Sesshoumaru turned this answer over in his mind for a brief moment, deeply confused. Unfortunately, he didn't have much time to dwell on her cryptic declaration, because, to his horror, she burst into tears.

It wasn't quiet, lady-like weeping either. She was sobbing in huge gulps and burying her face in her hands as if that would hide the fact that she was wailing like an injured cow. Sesshoumaru felt a vaguely shocked frown crease his brow. Just what the hell is going on here? he wondered. He was at a loss. He was always lost when women cried.

"Kagome-sama!"

Startled, Sesshoumaru turned his head and saw that Myouga had finally awoken from the warmth of his breastplate and resituated himself on his shoulder. He was clearly upset that the miko was upset – the little flea looked as though he were having some sort of attack from the way he was jumping up and down and waving his arms. Sesshoumaru watched at the old retainer hopped from his shoulder and landed on Kagome's knee.

"Kagome-sama!" he cried. "Please do not cry! We will help you!"

We will? Sesshoumaru wondered. Events seemed to be moving a little too quickly for his taste, and he wondered if Myouga was going to consult him before he made any more decisions.

For her part, Kagome was experiencing a moment of severe cognitive dissonance. If she had to pick the least sexy thing in the world to save her from thoughts of possible meaningless passion, Myouga, hopping up and down on her knee, would have been at the top of the list. With difficulty, Kagome scrubbed the tears from her eyes and focused on his rotund body and wrinkled face.

The back of her mind poked her, hard, and Kagome could feel a certain logic forming, and it calmed her somewhat. In fact, she felt so sure of herself that she could taste her relief in her mouth, and she was suddenly herself again; she wasn't the hime. She was still the miko, and Sesshoumaru was... well, he was still himself, but the pieces of the puzzle were suddenly clicking, if not into place, then into some semblance of order. She knew this with certainty.

Because no one in their right mind would have sex with Myouga watching; he was better than a cold shower.

Kagome wanted to kiss him, but refrained. She was feeling a little lightheaded, and everything had taken on that strange sense of the surreal, the way it did when she was in college and had stayed up too late studying for a class. Blinking very slowly, she swiped a hand across her eyes, drying her tears. "Sorry, Myouga-jii-chan. I'm just, um... a little upset right now."

Myouga gave her a look full of sympathy. Hopping down to her ankle, he made a big display out of inspecting it. "Ah!" he said finally. "Do not worry! You will be able to walk as soon as tomorrow!"

Kagome gently probed it with her fingers again – already it seemed less sore, but it still hurt, and she hissed between her teeth. Ignoring the fact that she needed to be able to walk now, rather than tomorrow, she carefully lifted the foot and placed it on her knee. She was somewhat surprised to find that the limp sock she had been stretching was still in her hand – though if she had expected it to disappear, she was obviously in more trouble than she thought – and set about wrapping it as best she could around the ankle. "Thank you," she said as warmly as possible. "But how did you find me?"

She had addressed Myouga, but it was Sesshoumaru who answered. "You made a fuss," he informed her, boredom leeching his voice of color.

Kagome felt a stab of annoyance, and would have glanced up to glare at him if she hadn't been so occupied with the damn sock. It was probably his fault she was feeling so out of it right now. Him and his stupid pretty hair. "Yes, well," she replied, pulling it tighter, "not all of us can be perfect. Some of us cry when we get hurt."

Sesshoumaru arched an eyebrow. "Quite loudly," he said.

Looking up, Kagome frowned. "Well, do pardon me," she snapped before returning to her sock. She was experiencing difficulties getting it to tie into place as it simply wasn't long enough. Her head hurt, her nose and throat were stuffed and scratchy, and she felt like she was going to either fall asleep or cry again. Kagome suspected she might be a little overwrought.

The demon lord felt his nose tickle with the smell of her unshed tears and his mouth twisted with irritation. He couldn't stand it when people cried. Maybe if she was distracted she would refrain from that horrible braying.

"You still haven't answered my question," he said quickly, hoping to make her think about something other than whatever was making her cry. After a moment's thought he amended the statement with, "...satisfactorily."

Kagome looked up again and furrowed her brow. "What?" she asked, puzzled.

"Why are you here?"

Myouga, still on her leg, turned to her as well. "That is an excellent question, milord. Kagome-sama, what brings you here again? Did you read another story?"

"Um..." Kagome fiddled with the sock. Her head felt full of cotton.

"Story?" Sesshoumaru asked, narrowing his eyes. If she doesn't stop worrying that sock, I'm going to melt it, he thought. His patience was stretched rather thin tonight and he wondered if he'd ever be able to go back to sleep.

Kagome avoided his gaze and addressed Myouga instead. "Sort of," she said. "But I don't know if I can talk about it." She twined the fabric through her fingers.

Gritting his teeth, Sesshoumaru reached down and plucked the sock from her hands.

"Hey! I need that to bandage my foot!" Kagome exclaimed and without thinking made a grab for it. The tips of her fingers brushed it before Sesshoumaru jerked it out of her grasp. She immediately sent him a glare.

"Why are you here?" he demanded for a third time.

"Give me my sock and I'll tell you," she retorted.

Sesshoumaru said nothing, merely arched his eyebrow again. Kagome briefly fantasized about shaving it off while he slept before realizing that she was probably not in any position to negotiate. She didn't think he'd kill her, but she'd been wrong about things before. She pressed her lips together and sat back, crossing her arms.

"I'm... looking for a hime," she said.

Sesshoumaru said nothing, merely waited for her to fill the silence.

Heaving a sigh, Kagome dropped her eyes. "I have some business with her."

Myouga hopped up onto her knee. "What sort of business, Kagome-sama? What is her name?" he asked.

Kagome shrugged. "I'm not very certain, but I just have to find her. Her name is... Machiko."

Through lowered lashes, Kagome tried to observe Sesshoumaru's reaction to the name, but like always he kept his mask in place. Maybe Machiko had never mentioned her name? It seemed unlikely, but stranger things had happened.

"But why are you here?" Myouga asked. Kagome was getting tired of that question.

"I just have to be in the northwest. She'll find me," Kagome informed him, although now that she thought about it Machiko probably wouldn't be able to

find her if she didn't actually go to villages and spread word about herself. Frustrated, she sighed again. She'd been too focused on getting the responsibility done that she had overlooked her actually doing it. Annoyed with herself, Kagome slumped. "Anyway, may I please have my sock back, now?"

Sesshoumaru gave her a withering glance, and before Kagome could say anything, shredded the sock into one long strip.

"Hey! I don't have very many of those!" she cried, snatching it out of his clawed fingers. "It's cold enough with socks, I don't think I'd survive without them!"

Sesshoumaru shrugged. "You will not survive very long at any rate unless you find some way to make yourself warmer," he informed her.

"Oh, thanks for pointing that out," she huffed. "I honestly thought I could just sit here all night and be peachy in the morning, but I'm glad you're around to tell me differently." She coughed violently, which caused her head to hurt even more.

Sesshoumaru couldn't decide whether to question her use of the word ‘peachy' or to annoy her further by telling her that she was welcome, so he said nothing and merely watched as she wound the ruined sock around her ankle, making small sounds of pain as she did so. She looked broken, and ill.

There was an unfamiliar feeling stirring in him, spreading across his chest and up his throat. Sesshoumaru thought of the years he'd wasted in the East, of the endless days in which he did nothing and was nothing. He thought of the little girl this miko had befriended for such a short while, and of the young woman she had helped him avenge. He thought of the House of the Moon, standing again, because of her. And here she was, cold and sick and injured.

He felt guilty.

Myouga was speaking. "Kagome-sama, if I find a branch for you do you think you could walk back to your campsite? You would be able to lean on it!"

"I don't know," he heard her mutter. She seemed in danger of falling asleep.

Myouga thought so, too, apparently. He hopped onto her shoulder, his voice suddenly strained and urgent. "Do not fall asleep, Kagome-sama! It is dangerous in the cold!"

"...I'm fine..." she mumbled. Sesshoumaru watched as she propped her head on her hand and tried to focus on the bandage. With fumbling fingers, she tied it in place and uncrossed her legs, preparing to heave herself to her feet.

Sesshoumaru reached a decision.

For a brief moment, Kagome thought she had been mistaken about the whole sex thing, because, without warning, there were strong hands around her waist, and then she was being lifted into the air. Whee! she thought giddily. After all, there were worse ways to lose one's virginity than to someone who had such pretty hair.

And then she was able to examine that hair much more intimately than she ever thought possible as her stomach came into sharp contact with something hard. "Oof," she expelled as she landed on Sesshoumaru's shoulder.

"Watch out for me, Sesshoumaru-sama!" Myouga cried as he hopped away and to Sesshoumaru's other shoulder. The demon ignored them both as he snaked an arm around her legs and began to walk in the direction from which she had come.

"Hey, it's polite to ask if you can do that," she informed him, though her voice was somewhat muffled.

The demon said nothing.

"Well, fine," she said. "I guess I won't talk to you then."

Considering that she had managed to confuse him approximately fifty percent of the time she spoke this evening, Sesshoumaru did not object.

For almost a full minute Kagome was silent. Her eyes felt heavy and everything hurt and all she wanted to do was pour out the hot tea she had started to make and go to bed beside a hot fire, but she barely had the energy

to stay awake. Unfortunately, she was also feeling giddy at the same time, and the hair in front of her face – long, silver, and stupidly pretty – was swaying gently as he walked. She found it mesmerizing.

"You know," she eventually said conversationally, trying not to think about how close his face was to her dirt-and-leaf covered behind, "no one's thrown me over their shoulder for ages. The last time someone did that, he took me back to his cave and tried to make me his woman." How long has it been since I thought of Kouga? she wondered, and felt sad.

"Indeed," Sesshoumaru replied. There didn't seem to be much he could say to that. He sniffed the air and took a turn. Between the trees he could see the light of her fading campfire.

"You don't have to do this," Kagome tried again. "I hate to inconvenience you."

Sesshoumaru said nothing. He wondered what she would do if he dumped her on the ground and left her there.

Kagome felt light-headed. "It's okay, really. I'll make it up to you somehow. I mean, I'll help you find that girl and stuff, and then you'll be happy, right? With your son?"

He stopped walking. "What?" he demanded. He tried to turn and look at her, but instead got an eyeful of her backside. Which wasn't bad, as backsides went, but he inevitably felt silly giving it a withering glare.

Kagome giggled. "Oh, yeah, that's right. Never mind, that's a secret," she said. She tittered again. His hair was really pretty. She'd touch it, but some self-preservation instinct reminded her that he had a tendency to be cranky about that sort of thing.

Sesshoumaru said nothing as he walked into her campsite, since she was obviously feverish and unable to hold an intelligent conversation. He set her down by the fire as gently as possible while still being unceremonious, and she sagged forward as she hit the ground.

"Go to sleep," he said, hoping she would be susceptible to authoritative voices in her fevered state.

"Not a problem," she muttered. She was so tired. Her sleeping bag was only a foot away, so she crawled into it without even bothering to brush off the leaves that peppered her hakama.

He just watched her as her breathing slowed until a small voice broke the stillness.

"Sesshoumaru-sama," Myouga said from his shoulder, sounding slightly awed, "why did you do that?"

Sesshoumaru just shrugged. "I do not need to explain my actions to you," he replied. Good thing, too, he thought. The truth was he had rarely done things out of guilt before, so the sensation was fairly new to him. As he laid more tinder on the fire, limning the campsite in warm tones of orange and yellow, he made a note to not make it a habit; no doubt he had a lot to feel guilty about.

In her sleeping bag, Kagome sneezed again as she drifted into dreams. Sesshoumaru propped himself against a tree, and waited for the night to end.

Tales from the House of the Moon
by
Resmiranda

Chapter Twelve

"One of the lessons of history is that 'nothing' is often a good thing to do and always a clever thing to say." -- Will Durant

* * *

Caught in his claws, his hair looked like ropes of moonlight twined through

the branches of a tree; shining and incandescent when he turned his hands to the light, grey like the ravenous sea when he let the shadows fall, and always sliding like silk over his skin – heavy, and difficult to hold. Distracted from his original purpose of picking out a few stray leaves, Sesshoumaru gazed at the net of silver, and thought of his mother.

It was so strange to suddenly have her on his mind – he hadn't thought of her for years. Indeed, he couldn't remember the last time she had tiptoed into his head, the same way she had tiptoed into his room at night when he was still a little boy, her sly smirk half-hidden behind the long sleeves of her indigo kimono, her silver hair in wild loops and waves. She always hated to have it pulled back; his father wore a queue, scraping his hair back from his face, but she always liked to be unfettered, letting it fall where it may, curling over her slender shoulders and down her back, sweeping over her throat, brushing the delicate bones of her cheeks.

He remembered that she wasn't pretty. Her build and hair were her best features, but her face was too bright and open; she'd never been demure like all the ladies of court. She had freckles and a snubbed nose. Her mouth was too wide, her eyes too small, and she always had that devilish smirk on her face so he could never tell if she was planning some silly prank or not, though it was usually best to just assume that she was. When she would slip into his room and slide the door shut, she always filled the room with her bright scent. She smelled brilliant, like a warm, orange sunset.

"Papa?" he would ask. He was so young when she was alive. So little. Just a pup, though he liked to think differently.

"Asleep," she would whisper. "He had a hard day."

"I see," he would say, and she would always laugh and swoop down on him and lift him from his bed and swing him around in the air before pulling him close into her strong arms and rubbing her snubbed, crooked nose against his straight one. Sesshoumaru closed his fingers around the silk strands of his hair and tried to remember her voice.

"So solemn, my little boy! You should smile more."

"You smile enough for both of us," he said. His mother just laughed softly in

the dark as she carried him over to the window, where she set him down.

"Now," she said, hands on hips, "tell me what my boy did today."

"I learned my numbers," he informed her.

Her eyes twinkled a little as she smoothed her kimono and settled in front of the window. Patting her lap, she held out a hand. In the dim light of the stars, the tips of her claws gleamed softly. "And...?"

He sighed. She always treated him like such a child, but he went over to her anyway. Always impatient, she grabbed him and drew him into her lap.

"And why don't you say them for me?"

So warm and soft. He supposed he could relax a little bit. Gingerly, he leaned back into the curve of her body, and her arms slid around his chest and pulled him close.

"I learned how to write them, too," he said.

"Oh really?" she laughed. "Here." In front of him, her right hand unfolded and bloomed, white skin, like a flower in the moonlight. "Draw them on my palm."

Frowning in concentration, Sesshoumaru extended a finger and, carefully so as not to scratch her hand, began to draw.

"Ichi," he whispered, tracing a long, flat line. "Ni – " a short line over a long one," – san – " two short lines over a long one, " – shi, go, roku – " his favorite shape, " – shichi... ku?"

"Ah-ah," his mother said. Her chin was resting on the crown of his head. "Ku is after..."

Sesshoumaru bit his lip. He could feel the skin sliding over his thick, straight hair and gathering at the edges of her jaw, grinning.

"H... haaaaaaa..."

"Hachi?"

"Very good!" she exclaimed. "And then?"

"Ku... and jyu."

Retracting her hand, she placed her arm across his chest again. "Smart boy," she said fondly.
"I know," he replied.

"Oh! Arrogant, too! When will you learn that only your mother is perfect?"

"Hmph," he grunted.

"So pompous," she told him, tapping his nose. Suddenly she clapped her hands together. "I have an idea! Let's count the stars."

Sesshoumaru lifted his eyes and looked dubiously at the sky. "I don't think I learned that many numbers," he said doubtfully.

"Don't worry!" she whispered. She bent her head, letting the heavy curtain of wild hair fall to the side, and some of it brushed his shoulder, causing him to shiver a little bit. Weaving her long fingers into the shining loops, his mother drew a section of hair in front of them, locks falling over locks, slipping down and around itself until it looked like a silver cobweb, excruciatingly fine and deceptively fragile. "Catch the stars with this. Then we can take our time."

"That's impossible," he huffed.

He couldn't see her face, but he was certain she arched an eyebrow. It always looked so impish on her, but whenever he practiced in a mirror, he looked snobbish. "Is it now?" Quick as lightning, she passed a hand over the makeshift net, pushing it into the window, against the sky. When she brought her hand away, Sesshoumaru felt his eyes widen. Caught in the strands of her hair were tiny crystals, sparkling in the light of the moon.

Running a hand down his cheek, she kissed the top of his head. "See? Magic."

Sesshoumaru said nothing. His mother sighed and began to pluck the stars

from her hair and toss them back out the window. "They'll find their way back," she told him.

"Oh."

She laid her chin on his shoulder. "Laugh, my darling, laugh. It's something wondrous. Don't be so solemn."

One by one, the stars flew out his window and back to the sky.

It was only a few weeks later that he learned that the stars were just crystallized poison that she had created from her claws, and he had felt such disappointment it was almost a physical pain. She was always telling him stories and playing pranks; she loved a good joke. And when she died, she never laughed again.

She'd been dead for a week when he tiptoed into her room, a sullen teenager with a tongue so swollen from repressed tears he could barely breathe. Softly he'd stepped inside and stood there, looking at her bedding and her low tables, her wardrobe full of thick kimonos, for what seemed like an hour before he finally walked over to the low table on the side of the room where she had spent so many hours sitting and reading or writing.

His footsteps sounded loud in the silence of the room, even as he tried to mask them. When he reached the table, he let his eyes fall on the polished surface and tried to categorize the objects there, tried to impassively slide the detritus of her existence into tiny compartments, tried to shut out the one thing that had strung them all together.

There was a scroll on it, and a little collection of seashells, and a cake of ink and paper with nearly incomprehensible scribbles on it. He couldn't bring himself to look at them. Slowly, he extended a hand and lightly ran his fingertips over the scroll and the seashells, feeling them. He was hovering over the paper, just feeling its texture but not reading it when out of the corner of his eye he noticed something that had been accidentally knocked under the table. Unnecessary movement was painful and tiring, but he knelt anyway and picked it up.

It was her silver hairbrush, polished and gleaming, and caught in the bristles

were long strands of her luminescent hair, curling and wild even in death. Carefully, he ran a finger down one wavy, silky thread as it curved up from the bristles and down almost to the floor.

Irrationally, he had wanted to do something symbolic, like leave little poisoned crystals in her hairbrush, or gather all the strands together and keep them inside his sleeves or tucked close to his heart. Something – anything – to keep her with him, and he wrapped the hair around his fingers and stifled a strangled growl. He should make a gesture, to show he loved her, to show he wanted her back. His father needed her, he needed her, and her scent was still all around him, and if he could just do the right thing, it would be okay –

As abruptly as it came upon him, the feeling passed, leaving him with a heavy emptiness.

It's too late, he thought then. Too late for that.

As if moving through water, he laid the brush back down. He looked at it for a moment before turning his heel and leaving it behind, never to return to that room until years and years in the future, when she was all but forgotten.

Now, sitting far from the House of the Moon, Sesshoumaru wished he had kept her hair. It was too late to sink his claws into her and keep her by his side, but he'd learned that it was never too late to regret.

As his own hair, tame and straight and thick, slid between his claws it caught the morning rays of the sun, and suddenly he was holding fire in his hands. It was a fire that didn't burn. Odd, that.

A snuffling sound reached him and he turned his head to look at the lump of miko in her strange cocoon-like bedding. He breathed deeply and found that she smelled less ill this morning, which was good.

Sesshoumaru pulled himself to his feet, and went to wake her.

* * *

There was a toe rhythmically digging into her back, and Kagome was

becoming quite irritated by it. Her head hurt, her sinuses felt like someone had taken steel wool to the inside of her face, and all she wanted was only five more minutes before she had to wake up and chase some naïve little knocked-up hime all across Japan.

Ineffectually, she swatted at the air in the vague direction of her back. "Stop it, Inuyasha. It's too early," she mumbled, pulling herself further into her sleeping bag like a disgruntled turtle.

Her tormenter stopped and Kagome breathed a sigh of relief as she felt slumber creeping over her. It was so warm and nice in this sleeping bag...

But.

There it was again, except harder this time – a very insistent toe nudging her between the shoulder blades. "Nnnn!" she moaned in protest, but her pathetic cries for mercy appeared to have no effect.

Poke. Poke.

Just ignore him, and he'll go away, Kagome thought desperately to herself, even though that particular course of action had never made Inuyasha go away before. Ignore, ignore, ignore...

Poke.

Poke, poke.

Poke poke poke poke poke –

Kagome squeezed her eyes shut, shot straight up in her sleeping bag, and shrieked.

"SIT!"

Nothing happened. Cautiously, Kagome cracked one eye open and saw white clothes and black shoes. Her gaze traveled up the white clad leg, to the bright obi, on to the heavy armor, and finally came to a stop at the face of Sesshoumaru who was looking, if his expression could be described as

something at all, annoyed.

Any other time she would have been afraid to see the demon lord upon waking, but something was marring his cold, dangerous appearance.

Kagome tilted her head to the side. "Did you know you have a leaf in your hair?" she wondered out loud.

If anything, Sesshoumaru looked even more annoyed as he lifted a striped arm and daintily plucked the offending foliage from his pristine silver bangs. Slowly, as if to make certain that she was watching, he held it between his index and middle fingers, and before her eyes the leaf disintegrated in a rush of poison. He lowered his hand.

"And now I do not," he informed her.

Kagome laughed nervously as she shifted in her sleeping bag. "Nope," she agreed. "You certainly took care of it." He didn't reply, merely stared down at her, and she found that on the list of most comforting of sights early in the morning, having a feudal demon lord looking as though wondering how one's head would look as a trophy on his wall was definitely on the bottom of the list. Squirming uncomfortably, she looked away in search of a distraction.

The first thing that caught her eye was the fire – oddly, it was higher than she had left it last night. Frowning, Kagome probed her mind. Her memories of last night were a confusing jumble, and she shook her head slightly as if to jar them back into place.

She remembered being very, very incoherent. Feverish. She'd lost her campsite somehow, and her leg was hurt...

Kagome drew her foot out of the sleeping bag and inspected it with a hard eye. There didn't seem to be any major swelling, and it was only a little tender when she probed it with her fingers. She shrugged; it could not have been anything too severe or her foot would be purple and swollen to the size of a Honda. What else?

A blush crept across her face. She remembered someone carrying her, and she had been enraptured with his hair. Unable to bring herself to look at

Sesshoumaru, who was still parked stoically by her bedside, Kagome shoved the memory out of her mind. Moving on! she thought brightly. What else?

There was running, and fear. Something had chased her, and it had been large and hairy. Kagome felt ill. Slowly she turned to Sesshoumaru and opened her mouth.

"Did I – did I kill a bear last night?" she asked him, feeling guilty for killing an animal.

Sesshoumaru had watched with interest as she had inspected herself to make certain all her limbs were still in their proper places. Her question sounded fairly odd; he assumed she had been too feverish to remember. "Yes," he told her. And quite impressively, too, he appended mentally. She was fairly strong for a human, but wouldn't last long against a real opponent.

Kagome saw his eyes glitter a little bit, and she thought she saw approval in his face. She blinked and it was gone. "Ah," she commented, nodding as another idea struck her. She really wasn't a morning person lately. "And... why are you still here?"

The demon looked mildly affronted, and immediately a wave of horrified embarrassment swept over her. Kagome clapped a hand over her mouth. Dimly, she realized that she still wasn't thinking very clearly; her mother would have been disappointed. "Oh, god, I'm sorry!" she exclaimed. "That was really rude! What I meant to say was... well, I meant to say, ‘why are you still here,' but what I should have said was... um... thank you?"

The demon stared down his nose at her. "For what?"

Kagome squirmed out of the sleeping bag and stood up, keeping her weight off her injured foot. She was still a head or two shorter than he, but at least she didn't feel quite so little now. "For carrying me back," she reminded him. "Thank you."

He did not reply.

It's too early in the morning to be this awkward, Kagome thought as the silence stretched out.

"So... why are you still here?" she asked again, noticing her breath curling in the cold air. It was the only thing she could think of to break the frozen stillness of the winter morning.

Sesshoumaru just looked at her intently before giving an elegant shrug. He wasn't entirely certain himself, but there was nowhere else he really needed to be at the moment. Here was as good as anywhere.

Kagome waited, but it seemed he wasn't going to offer any more information. He was really making her uncomfortable; when he wasn't fighting he could look really intense, like a dog with a bone. Briefly, Kagome considered grabbing a stick and throwing it, just to see if he would chase after it, but that idea was quickly abandoned as it was probably fraught with peril. Casting about helplessly, her eyes lighted on her backpack.

Ah-ha! she thought triumphantly. A safe topic! Turning to Sesshoumaru, she put on a bright face.

"Would you like breakfast?" she asked, trying to be as chipper as it was possible to sound with a stuffed nose.

"No," he answered.

She felt her forehead wrinkle. "You aren't hungry?"

The thought of food made his stomach turn a little bit. "No."

"So you don't want breakfast?"

His eyebrow twitched. "No."

Kagome felt herself running quickly out of polite options. "Tea, then?" she suggested.

"No."

"What about coffee? Or water?" she said desperately.

He gave her a look filled with bored irritation. "No," he replied.

Kagome's tenuous hold on her patience snapped. She was feeling sick, her foot was still sore, and it was cold. "Would you like to not be so difficult, then?" she demanded.

Sesshoumaru blinked.

For half a second, Kagome's heart stopped. She remembered that there weren't any enchanted rosaries now. Why isn't my life flashing before my eyes? she thought. That's supposed to happen before you die, right? She almost squeezed her eyes shut, but didn't move.

Finally, Sesshoumaru opened his mouth.

"No?" he answered. Bizarrely, he sounded confused.

Kagome chose to not press the issue any further. "Okay!" she said brightly. "Then I'm going to have tea, if that's okay with you." She found she didn't necessarily enjoy his company, but it was still nice to have someone else around to distract her from her solitary thoughts.

Another annoyingly elegant shrug. Incongruently, Kagome decided that his shoulders had to be very well shaped in order to be strong enough to shrug with all that armor weighing on them. Shaking her head, she turned to her backpack and dug out a bottle of water, a kettle, a stand, a slightly squashed teabag, and a thick plastic cup. As efficiently as possible, she bustled around the still demon and began to do the little things that kept her chaotic life in order and her tattered sanity intact.

Observing her, Sesshoumaru wondered if she was still a little addled. She moved as quickly as possible as her injured foot would allow, as though she were trying to keep her mind from something. Interesting, he thought.

The familiar actions calmed her. Placing the kettle above the still cheerful fire, Kagome turned back to Sesshoumaru. "Would you like to sit down at least?" she asked him.

She felt a sharp pang of relief when he gracefully lowered himself to the

ground next to her sleeping bag. Kagome shuffled the short distance to him and did likewise. They sat in, if not companionable silence, then at least quietly and vaguely comfortably. Kagome found herself relaxing just a little bit in the cold air when Sesshoumaru shifted, very slightly, where he sat.

"What brings you here, miko?" he said, suddenly.

Kagome jumped. What? she thought, before realizing it would be better if she articulated that thought rather than stare at Sesshoumaru like a stunned fish. "What?" she said out loud.

Sesshoumaru turned his head to look her in the eye. It was a simple question. "Last night you said that you were looking for a hime. Is this true?"

She lowered her eyes and stared at her hands; she felt a blush rising on her cheeks. "Yes, I am," she confirmed.

"Why?" he demanded.

"Because I'm supposed to," she replied.

Sesshoumaru repressed the urge to roll his eyes. "No. Why are you here in this time?"

Startled, Kagome glanced up. "You know about that?" she asked. "Who told you?"

"Myouga."

Stupid flea, she thought crankily. Her time-traveling was supposed to be a secret. "Oh," was all she could think to say to that.

Sesshoumaru said nothing else. He found that silence made people try to fill it up and eventually they would say something useful. The trick was to look intensely interested while thinking about something else entirely until something he could understand popped up.

He didn't have to wait long. "I... I read a story." Kagome was aware of how silly that sounded, and tried to amend it. "I mean, I read a story that I was in, and

since I hadn't, um, done it yet, that meant I had to go back in time and take care of it."

Sesshoumaru nodded. Ah, duty, he thought. That was something he could understand.

"So... that's why I'm here." Kagome twirled a lock of hair absently around her finger and bit her lip. The demon lord was still staring at her, as if expecting something, and Kagome hated to disappoint people. The knowledge of what the hime and the demon prince had done in the woods was a large, uncomfortable – not to mention embarrassing – thing in her mind, like an elephant that she didn't want to look at or talk about. She had come back to find him, and here he was, albeit ahead of schedule.

Now that he was actually in front of her, Kagome wondered just what the hell she thought she was going to say to him when she had found him. How exactly did one broach the topic of one-night stands with someone, especially someone she didn't know well? They'd fought against a common enemy, sure, but that hardly put them on anything other than nodding acquaintance terms. It had been years – years – since he had last tried to kill her, but he had still tried; though even then it hadn't been anything... well, personal. Damn him! There was just no way of knowing what sort of terms they were on, and even though she knew she had to ask, Kagome was suddenly extremely uncomfortable. She found that she would rather be anywhere at this moment than here, about to ask a dangerous demon lord about his sex life.

In her mind, Kagome tried out several segues. Pardon me, but did you have sex with a human hime nine months ago? Yes? Surprise! You're going to be a daddy! God that sounded horrible. So... accidentally have sex with a human in the woods lately? No, no. That was ridiculous. Following in your father's footsteps, eh? was even worse. She wondered how long she would live after she asked that question.

He was still waiting for her to say something. Oh, damn.

"I came to find you," she blurted out, then immediately regretted it. Smooth, she thought. That was like butter. Kagome wanted to kick herself.

Sesshoumaru had been cataloguing the number of leaves on the trunk of the

tree right behind Kagome, but at her sudden declaration he lost count. His plan to stay silent until she said what he wanted to hear suddenly forgotten, he cocked his head ever so slightly. "Me?" he said. Well. That was unanticipated, he thought. He didn't know what he had been expecting her to say, but it wasn't that.

"Ahaha!" Kagome giggled nervously. "Um, yes. At least, I think I was looking for you. Well, I was supposed to look for you after I found the hime, but yes."

Confusion reigned. "Why would you need to find a human hime before myself?" She was blushing again, and he could smell her blood, heated and fast, circulating close to the skin.

"Ahaha!" she said again. Sesshoumaru wondered if that spill she took from running away from the bear had rattled something in her brain. Perhaps a connection had been knocked loose. Did it work like that? He noticed that she was worrying the sleeves of her haori, just like she had that night he had seen her, before he was himself again.

"Well?" he prompted.

"Ah!" the miko cried and covered her face with her hands. She wasn't doing very well. "Um... ah... oh, god..."

"...yes?"

She looked like she was having a fit. "Oh, no!" she wailed, shaking her head back and forth.

Sesshoumaru wondered what on earth had come over her, and he wished Myouga was around to tell him if this was normal behavior or not, but the damn flea had wandered off in search of a snack.

She was still moaning into her hands when Sesshoumaru decided he'd had enough. He reached out, grabbed her wrists, and pried her hands from her face, looking her straight in the eyes.

"What?" he demanded.

Kagome shut her eyes and strung the words together, knowing if she didn't get them out fast enough she would never say it.
"Didyoumatewithahumanhime!" she squealed, her face burning with humiliation. His hands felt like manacles. She tugged, but he held fast.

I'm dead! Oh, god, oh god, oh god, I'll just be a little puddle of smoking green goo when he's done with me! Kagome gave up and hunched over, waiting for the death blow. Mama, Jii-chan, Souta, I'm sorry!

There was a long pause, wherein nothing happened. After a moment, Kagome cracked open her eyes. The sight that greeted them was so priceless that she had to open them all the way.

Eyes wide and mouth slightly agape, Sesshoumaru was looking dumbfounded. She'd only seen him look that way once before, when she'd accidentally pulled the Tetsusaiga from the throne like some silly, latter-day Arthur, and she found she liked it. It was nice to see him discomfited by her for a change, rather than the other way around.

Slowly he unlocked his fingers from her wrists and sat back. Kagome rubbed her arms where she could still feel the imprint of his hands and watched him warily. Since he hadn't killed her right away, it was probably a good bet that he wasn't going to, but regardless she wanted to keep on her toes. Not that keeping on her toes would do any good, since he was inhumanly fast. Finally, blinking a little, he spoke.

"I am unable to understand the state of mind required to contemplate even thinking about that question," he told her.

Kagome knew what he meant. "Sorry?" she offered.

Sesshoumaru merely raised his eyebrows.

Waving a hand, Kagome tried to explain. "Well... the story – that I found, the one that I'm in, remember – mentioned that the hime had a son by... um... the inu-ouji. I just assumed that it was you."

Sesshoumaru could feel his mouth twisting in displeasure. "It is me," he informed her. "But I assure you that I have not touched a human hime." Then,

just in case she didn't get it the first time, he added: "Ever."

"I believe you!" Kagome assured him, since his eyes were narrowing again and she found she didn't like that at all. "It's just - I guess the story got it wrong?"

"Yes," he said. "It did."

Kagome paused. "Are you sure?"

"Yes!"

"Great!" Kagome replied hastily. "Then, um, I wasn't looking for you, I guess." Irritation flooded her. Running into a principle player of the story early on would have made her job just that much easier, but it seemed that she was back at square one.

Sesshoumaru shot her a look. "Are you upset that I am not so unprincipled that I would lay with a human?"

Great. She'd offended him. "Well, it would have made my life simpler, but it's okay," she said, her hand held up in a placating gesture. "So I guess I'll just find a village and look for the hime and you can go do..." She trailed off, then rallied. "Well, whatever it is you do."

"Hmph," he said. "Is this why you were prattling on about my nonexistant son last night?"

Kagome blushed. She was getting rather good at blushing. "Yes. Sorry," she said again.

Sesshoumaru nodded, as if that explained everything.

Turning away, Kagome sighed. Back to the drawing board again. She felt heavy, and tired. The momentary invigoration she had felt, thinking that she would be finished with her task sooner than anticipated had completely evaporated, and that, coupled with believing she was about to be killed twice this morning, left her completely drained. She tried to concentrate and think back to the last time she'd crossed a road. One day ago? Two? It was so difficult. She'd cry if she didn't need her strength.

Kagome leaned forward, propped her head in her hands, and closed her eyes.

Sesshoumaru watched the miko as the life seemed to leak out of her, and felt a pang of sympathy. He could see that she was bowed under the weight of a burden; he'd known that same feeling of crushing duty many times before. Anything could crush someone, when properly applied, just like almost anything could kill them if used properly. She was half-dead beneath her obligation; he wondered how long she could continue if something didn't bend soon.

Not for the first time, he was reminded of Rin. Rin, who had never wanted for anything and who had never felt the chains of duty snake around her limbs and drag her down. She had lived a happy life because he had kept her under his care, telling himself it was because her life was his when really had been the other way around. He'd sacrificed and lost so much because of her – no, for her – because it was his happy obligation to do so. And he'd lost her, but this miko, who had come back because of stories, because of tales from the past, had reconciled his loss and desire, and now he could feel the same black waves of exhaustion – the same that he felt not a scant month ago – roll from her body.

She looked very young and afraid, and very, very tired.

Sesshoumaru reached a decision.

Kagome looked up and was surprised to find the demon lord still sitting there. For some reason, she thought that he would have left by now, without a word as she'd seen him do so often. She gave him a wan smile. "I guess this is good-bye," she said, thinking he might be waiting for her dismissal.

Sesshoumaru shrugged, and Kagome frowned. "Is there something more you want to know?" she asked him. She couldn't for the life of her think what else he would want to ask, but she would try to help him.

He didn't answer. "I believe I will stay," he announced instead.

Kagome's mouth dropped open.

"Huh?" she said intelligently.

The look he gave her made her feel like an idiot. "I will stay."

She must still be dreaming. That had to be it. "Why?" she demanded. "Don't you hate humans? Why would you stay with me?"

He shrugged. "My reasons are my own," he said cryptically.

Anger flared. "Wait, I didn't say you could travel with me. That is what you're planning to do, right?"

He nodded.

"Well, you don't have to," she informed him haughtily. Oh, god, someone to talk to, someone to take your mind off it, someone there... she thought incoherently. She pushed the whispering voice away. "I won't be a burden on anyone."

This time she knew it wasn't her imagination; a look of annoyance flickered across his face. "Do not insinuate that I am so weak that you would be a burden," he said, just as haughtily.

"That's not what I meant!" she fumed. "I meant, don't you have better things to do, other than follow me around? Don't you have a kingdom or something to take care of?"

Sesshoumaru thought hard. "I am taking – " what was that word Myouga had used? " – an extended constitutional."

Kagome wrinkled her nose. "A holiday?"

Though he'd never heard the word before, Sesshoumaru took a good stab at it. "Yes."

"You want to spend your holiday with me?"

Snorting, he turned away from her. "I did not say that," he reminded her. "I said I would stay."

"I don't need you to stay!"

"I suppose you will escape the next bear on your wounded foot," he said nonchalantly. "And the next. And you will of course adequately defend yourself from gangs of bandits with your bow and – " he glanced at her quiver, " – three arrows."

"Oh!" she fumed. "I can take care of myself."

"That's what I just said," he retorted.

"Well, then you don't have to come with me," she snapped back.

"But I will."

If she'd been standing, she would have stamped her foot. "Why?" she demanded again, wanting to give in, needing company, missing Myouga, missing her friends, missing him as he sat in front of her.

I'm lonely, she had told her mother. She wanted to throw something.

Sesshoumaru didn't see what was so difficult about the situation, so he said the only thing he knew she would understand, the only reason he could give. "Think of it as repaying a debt," he replied.

All the air went out of her, and Kagome deflated. Abruptly she clambered to her feet and turned away from him, not wanting him to see her face.

She felt like she had been punched in the gut. Even knowing what she had helped him do, she had never thought he would feel that he was in her debt. It was just something she was supposed to do, like finding the jewel, like loving her friends, like giving up her happiness for the future of the world. It had always been a responsibility that she had fulfilled; she'd never thought that anyone would be grateful for what she did.

Ever since that first day, she'd done what she had to do, and suddenly someone had noticed.

Kagome turned back to him, and saw him in the new dawn.

Standing in the light of the morning, the miko appeared almost insubstantial, as though a breeze would blow her away. Sesshoumaru entertained himself with the thought of pushing lightly on her chest and watching her fall over while he waited for an answer.

At last she appeared to capitulate. "Fine. But you can't kill anyone," she announced.

Sesshoumaru frowned. "But – " he began.

"Those are the terms!" she cut him off. "Unless we're being attacked, you can't kill anyone! Or fight! I have to go to a lot of villages, and I can't afford to make people afraid of me. Or, I guess, more afraid than they'll be anyway." The idea, that word of a miko with a youkai would travel faster than just a wandering miko, tickled her mind, and Kagome liked it.

She watched as Sesshoumaru slowly inclined his head. "Agreed," he said.

"And you're not going to kill me," she told him.

"If I was, do you not think I would have already done so?" he asked reasonably.

Kagome put her hands on her hips. "Well I thought you would at least twice today," she informed him.

"That is merely a healthy respect," he replied. "But no. I have my honor."

Kagome gave up. "And I talk a lot," she said.

He raised an eyebrow.

"Just to warn you," she added.

He snorted. "I did not need a warning. I already knew."

This time she did stamp her foot. "You – !" she began, but was cut off abruptly.

"Kagome-sama! Please look where you are stepping!"

Glancing down, she watched as Myouga hopped up the folds of her clothing and came to rest on her shoulder. "I am back from my breakfast. Did I miss anything?" he asked.

Kagome groaned, and in the morning air the tea kettle began to whistle.

Tales from the House of the Moon
by
Resmiranda

Chapter Thirteen

"Record and play, after years of endless rewind;
Yesterday wasn't half as tough as this time."
-- Barenaked Ladies, Too Little Too Late

* * *

The first thing that Sesshoumaru, the Prince of the Western Lands, King of the Moonlit Country, and Lord of the House of the Moon, learned on his bizarre quest with the Miko of Time was that humans, in sufficiently large numbers, were strange and unpredictable creatures. The second thing he learned was that Kagome inspired him to act approximately twelve years old.

They ran across a village in the late afternoon of that first day. Kagome and Myouga had been chattering nonstop for almost seven hours, and by the time they finally shut their mouths Sesshoumaru found himself suffering from an incredible headache. Since she had somewhere to be and he did not, he trailed her on the road and as such was able to listen to her speak of her life now that she was no longer traveling with Inuyasha and her group of friends. Unfortunately, it was incredibly dull, if only because he had no idea what half

the words she used meant. From what he could gather, she had been studying history - by which she seemed to mean this time - and that she was so erudite that she was now a scholar and was going to continue her studies. It also appeared that while it had been fifty years since Naraku had finally been hunted down and defeated on a late autumn morning, only six years or so had passed for her. That explained her lack of age more succinctly than the simple explanation Myouga supplied him, which was merely that she was a time traveler.

She told Myouga about her friends and a boy she had 'dated' - Sesshoumaru assumed this meant courting - and how her brother had grown up and would be going into high school soon. Her 'classes' sounded just as dull as her life, although if he thought about it her life wasn't much duller than his own. He found that prospect incredibly depressing.

Half of the conversation was Myouga prattling on about himself and, tangentially, Sesshoumaru, which was even worse than hearing about Kagome's life since he already knew the ending, as it were. During long rhapsodies about his battle and the every day state things Sesshoumaru did, the demon allowed his mind to go pleasantly blank, a talent he had developed in the briefing chambers and for which he was eternally grateful. It served him well, it seemed, no matter where he was, or what babble to which he was forced to listen.

The sun was sliding down the sky when he caught the scent of many humans living close together, which was not the most pleasant of scents. He wrinkled his nose.

"So anyway, I said to Eri-chan that there was no way I was going to date her brother because he never brushes his teeth and I just couldn't stand that - " Kagome was saying as Myouga nodded sympathetically when Sesshoumaru cut her off.

"There is a village not far from here to the west," he announced from his position behind her. Kagome jumped - she'd nearly forgotten that he was back there. Whirling abruptly in her path she almost collided nose-to-armor with him. Ignoring her near brush with a bloody nose, Kagome clapped her hands.

"Excellent!" she exclaimed. "We should go there so I can start looking for

Machiko."

Sesshoumaru said nothing, merely stared down at her. She was looking extremely energetic for someone who had been half-delirious the night before. He waited for her to strike out in the direction of the village with that annoying spring in her step, but she just stared up at him.

He was on the verge of asking her if he had grown another head when he wasn't looking when she blushed and looked down. "Um..." she said. "Could you lead the way? I have no idea which direction is west." Then, to his complete shock, she beamed up at him.

Slightly taken aback, Sesshoumaru stepped away from her bright smile. "Do you mean to tell me that you have had no idea which direction we have been going all this time?" he asked.

The girl in front of him gave a nonchalant shrug. "Well, I thought if I walked on a road long enough I was certain to run into a village at some point," she told him gaily.

Sesshoumaru stared.

Kagome waited for him to say something. He was looking at her again with those eerie golden eyes that only rarely revealed what he was really thinking. They were so different from Inuyasha's eyes, which may have been weird and golden, but at least they were wide and expressive; Sesshoumaru's were narrow, and a lighter shade than his brother's. The overall effect was something familiar but alien. Inuyasha had been everything to her, but looking into his brother's eyes was like coming home to a house with all the furniture rearranged.

Shifting from one foot to the other uncomfortably, Kagome wished he'd yell at her. That, at least, would be familiar enough to be comforting. Instead, after a long moment, he simply shook his head ever so slightly and veered off the path they had been following. Feeling stupid, she followed him.

There wasn't a lot of underbrush in this direction, which was a good thing, but she had the distinct feeling that Sesshoumaru was angry, which was bad. Kagome wondered if the situation could be considered a wash.

After about five minutes, Myouga, perched next to her ear, cleared his throat. "Don't worry, Kagome-sama; Sesshoumaru-sama also travels in random directions without knowing where he is going sometimes," he said in a low voice.

"He does?" Kagome whispered back, frowning. "Then why did he shake his head at me if he does the same thing?"

The old flea shrugged. "Perhaps he is surprised that anyone could be as insensible as he?" Myouga postulated.

In front of her, Sesshoumaru came to a stop.

"I heard that," he announced to the world at large before walking on as if he had said nothing at all.

As Kagome waited for her heart to start again, Myouga shouted from her shoulder. "Ah, Sesshoumaru-sama! Please forgive me!" he yelled, although to her he didn't sound terribly sorry at all.

Dropping back a little further, Kagome put a hand to her mouth and whispered behind it. "Do you think he bought that apology?" she asked Myouga.

"No," Sesshoumaru said loudly from fifteen meters in front of her.

"Eep!" Kagome squeaked.

This time Myouga didn't even bother to keep his voice down. "Sesshoumaru-sama knows that I am a loyal servant of his house, and as such I mean no disrespect when I say such things. I am old, and have a deep love of the truth," he told Kagome.

"You do?" Kagome wondered. This was news to her.

In front of her, she distinctly heard a snort.

"And I heard that, Sesshoumaru-sama!" Myouga shouted.

"I know," said the demon, raising a clawed hand and slicing through a thickly overhanging vine.

Deja vu, Kagome thought. Worse, irritating deja vu. She was distinctly reminded of Inuyasha and Shippou, except not at all.

They walked in silence for a while, Kagome remembering other forests and other times, and Sesshoumaru thinking god-knows-what.

Kagome ran a hand down the red fabric of her hakama - she'd donned the traditional garb that Edo's miko had foisted upon her so that she would be easily recognizable on sight - and wondered if she looked like Kikyou even more now. Every time she felt sad or was reminded of the past, she thought she must be even more like her predecessor. If Sesshoumaru were to turn around now, she wondered what he would see.

"We are here," the demon lord announced, jolting Kagome out of her thoughts. Even though her legs were tired and her injured foot was beginning to twinge just a little, she jogged to his side and looked out from the edge of the forest at the little village that looked like every other little village in Japan.

"What now, Kagome-sama?" Myouga asked.

In all honesty, Kagome had no idea. Miroku would have found the biggest house in town and offered to perform an exorcism, but Kagome had no idea how to even pretend to do such a thing. She shrugged. "I guess we'll go find the miko of this village," she said aloud.

"Excellent idea!" Myouga concurred. Sesshoumaru said nothing. It was starting to dawn on Kagome that Sesshoumaru said nothing if he had nothing to say; it was somewhat of a novel concept to her, so she let his silence pass and forged ahead.

The village was quiet and medium-sized, very similar to Edo fifty years ago, although Kagome had no idea what this village would be in the future; whereas Edo would be Tokyo, she had very little concept of where she was in terms of her own time. The farmers were probably still out in the forest, setting snares for a little meat for dinner, and the women were taking care of

household things, perhaps preparing food and tending to children. It was peaceful in the chill of the late afternoon sun.

"Miko-sama!"

Startled, Kagome turned her head. Emerging from between a few huts was an old man, smiling and waving a hand as he bowed. He didn't stop bowing as he hobbled toward her, giving her the impression of one of those little duck toys that bobbed up and down until they fell over. Kagome shifted uncomfortably - she'd never really grown used to being treated deferentially, and the old man was taking so much time bowing that he probably wouldn't reach them until nightfall. Glancing behind her Kagome assured herself that Sesshoumaru wasn't going to kill the man. Since the demon lord could not have looked more bored if he'd tried, she assumed it was all right to approach the villager, and so she turned back and walked toward him.

"Good afternoon, ojii-san," she greeted him, opting for formality.

"Good afternoon, miko-sama," the old man beamed and executed another bob. "What brings you to our village and how may I help you?"

"Er... well..." Kagome said. "I guess I was looking for the miko of this village."

At this proclamation, the man's face fell, which, considering the number of wrinkles he sported, was not a pretty sight. He bobbed. "I am sorry, miko-sama, but we lost our miko rather recently. We are currently without a priestess."

Kagome frowned. "I'm so sorry! Didn't she have time to train another miko?"

The old man shook his head. "Alas, but no. She was very young. I am sorry if you came to see her." He bobbed again.

Kagome looked away from him - all the bobbing was making her seasick - and bit her lip. "I don't suppose you would... let us stay here for the night?" she said hesitantly. "I can do small spells and I have a knowledge of medicines..."

The old man cut her off with a smile that creased his face into a number of wrinkles. He looked like a deferential raisin. "Miko-sama, you are too kind! I

will take you to the head of the village and he will decide."

"Thank you," Kagome said, and bowed, completing the great circle of bobbing.

The old man turned and hobbled down the lane in the direction of a large house. Kagome's foot was beginning to smart, so she hobbled after him, and she could feel Sesshoumaru following behind her.

The village was quaint and tiny and full of dirt, just like all the other villages she had passed through in her time in the Sengoku Jidai. There were children bundled up against the cold, playing in a field behind the little houses, and as Kagome passed one hut, she saw a woman inside, her face in her hands, crying. She had to check her impulse to break away from her tiny entourage and ask the woman what was troubling her. With difficulty, she tore her eyes away and kept her gaze on the ground for the rest of the short trip.

When they finally arrived, the old man turned to her and gestured for her to wait, so Kagome unshouldered her bow and leaned on it as he approached the door.

"Kagome-sama," Myouga said, next to her ear. "Are you feeling all right?"

Kagome shook her head. "I'm fine. My foot just hurts, that's all," she told him.

"Ah," he replied sagely. "It will be good to finally get off it, yes?"

Kagome smiled. "Definitely. I really hope they have a spare room or something," she whispered back. "I'm about ready to collapse."

"Why did you not say something?"

Surprised, Kagome looked over her shoulder. "Oh, it's nothing," she assured Sesshoumaru. The demon stared back in the flat, yellow afternoon.

She didn't look away this time. It was beginning to dawn on her just how little she knew of him. He was a lord, and a powerful demon, but about him she knew next to nothing, except that he had lost his little girl. His thoughts were obscured to outside observers, and as such, she was at a loss with how to react to him, or what sort of feelings she should ascribe to him in various situations.

For lack of a better word, Sesshoumaru was confusing. Even now, he was regarding her with what could only be described as bored intensity, as if he really, really, really didn't care. Kagome held his gaze as best she could.

For his part, Sesshoumaru was beginning to question his impulse to follow her, and since second-guessing his own motives was something he did maybe once a decade, the sensation of self-examination was making him rather uncomfortable.

It had been years since he had been in a human village, when his father would instruct him to follow and observe the lives of humans as he looked in on the villages under his rule. They had always kept at a distance, looking from the trees of the neighboring forests, or walking through the towns at night. It was strange now to be in the middle of one, following a human for whom he had no true affection or ties; she was only empty memories, loosely tied together, of a time that had passed.

Yet he followed her anyway. Sesshoumaru wondered why.

"Miko-sama!"

Kagome nearly jumped out of her skin. Whirling around, she snapped to attention. "Yes!" she cried, her voice more shrill than she'd intended. Standing at the top of the small steps to his doorway, the village leader gave her an odd look, but seemed to quickly shake it off. He was a nondescript man, like a hundred other village leaders she'd seen. He was much taller than she, though he seemed to walk with a permanent stoop. He hurried down the steps and stopped in front of her, bowing low. This impressed Kagome to no end since she thought he could not slump down any lower. "Miko-sama, allow me to introduce myself. I am Hiro, and I am in charge of this village. I would like to welcome you! It is an honor!" he exclaimed.

Kagome nodded at him. "Likewise, Hiro-sama," she returned with a smile.

The man stood up, but kept his gaze downward. "Miko-sama, please step inside my house. There are things I wish to discuss with you."

Startled, she almost took a step back. "A- all right," she replied. What now? she

wondered. She caught a subtle flickering of the headman's eyes even as his head was bowed; she knew he was surreptitiously studying the demon behind her. Good, she thought. Inuyasha usually caused comment, but Sesshoumaru was definitely an attention-grabber; with luck, word of the miko and the youkai would reach the right ears.

Straightening, the man turned and led them into his house.
No one seemed to comment on Sesshoumaru's presence; he was ushered in with deference, though Kagome could see his nose wrinkling ever so slightly. Snob, she thought.

Once they were comfortably settled in a fairly spacious room, tiny cups of sake sitting on trays in front of them, the headman cleared his throat. In the crowded moment before he began to speak, Kagome found that it was very difficult to separate the present from the past; this scenario was so familiar, had happened so many times fifty years ago, that she almost glanced at the figure in white next to her, expecting to see dog ears in place of the elegantly pointed ears of a full youkai. She refrained.

"Miko-sama, I wish to beseech you for your aide," the headman said. "For the past month, our village has been attacked by a boar youkai. It has been years since a youkai has even appeared near our village, so we are at a loss as to how to dispatch it, and it has killed seven people in a month, and trampled five huts into dust.

"We will give you shelter for the night, and food for your journey if you will help us," he finished, and bowed.

A mere six years ago, Kagome would have said yes immediately, but something was nagging at her mind. Narrowing her eyes, she regarded the headman suspiciously. "Might this boar youkai have had any part of the previous miko's death?" she asked slowly.

Immediately the headman sat up. "Aha-ha!" he laughed nervously. "That might, er, have had something to do with it."

Cue sinking feeling. Enter resignation, stage right, Kagome thought.

"But surely," the headman said, apparently not finished, "a miko who has

subdued a demon would find our own small youkai problem to be but a trifling thing!"

Kagome frowned. "Subdue?" she wondered.

The headman nodded at Sesshoumaru. "Your pet, miko-sama."

There was a brief moment where the world seemed to stand still. Then Kagome choked and the sake that had been sitting so benignly in her mouth promptly went up her nose. Spluttering, she tipped forward, leaning on one hand and covering her mouth with the other.

Next to her, Sesshoumaru was still as stone, considering his options. He hadn't been paying strict attention to the conversation, but someone had mentioned the word 'pet' and nodded in his direction, so it seemed to be a safe bet that his honor had been thoroughly impugned. He wasn't in the habit of killing wantonly, but sometimes it just seemed to be the most expedient thing to do.

Kill him now? he thought, Or later? Choices, choices.

Drawing out a poison-tipped hand, the demon lord thoughtfully cracked his knuckles.

His concentration was shattered when a shaking arm shot into his line of vision, palm facing toward him as if to ward him away from the source of the insult, and almost too late, Sesshoumaru remembered that he had given his word to refrain from killing. He turned to the coughing girl next to him and wondered what the hell he had been thinking to promise a damn fool thing like that.

Still trying to regain the use of her lungs, Kagome watched the demon lord through streaming eyes, unable to articulate the one thought in her head. You promised! She had no idea how she would stop him if he decided to make Filet of Headman, but surely her purifying powers might be able to make a dent. She really, really didn't want to use them, though. Please, just let it go! she begged silently, though she feared her message was lost in a flood of snot and irritated tears. Visions of decapitated bodies danced in her head - which, upon further reflection, was rather grisly. Kagome waited, the future hanging in the balance.

The world was slowing down. To her horror, Sesshoumaru slowly unfolded to his full height and leveled an icy glare at the still ignorant man at the head of the room.

Then he turned his heels and left.

The flood of relief was so palpable that Kagome began to cough all over again. The headman looked puzzled. For the briefest of moments, Kagome felt a deep and compelling urge to slap him across the face - that blithe, ignorant face, gazing at her with an expression of profound befuddlement, that face that had no idea how close it had come to being just a shish kebab on the poisoned claws of a youkai that regarded everyone as beneath him. In the back of her mind, Kagome knew his contempt included herself.

"I would appreciate it," she said, very slowly, "if you would not say that again."

"I don't understand," the headman said. "Do you not control that youkai?"

Clearing her throat, Kagome considered the options, settling for a close truth. "He is a... comrade," she said, dabbing at her lips and swiping at her leaking eyes.

"A comrade?" the headman asked. "I have never heard of a miko with a demon comrade."

There's a first time for everything. "He and I once fought against a common enemy," she informed him. "But, and I want to make this absolutely clear, I do not control him. He promised me that, unless threatened, he would not kill anyone as we traveled together, but..." Kagome considered her words carefully, "he can sometimes be, er, forgetful."

For her ears only, Myouga chuckled.

The headman was regarding her with wide eyes. "Miko-sama?"

Kagome gave him a bright smile, hoping to change the subject. "I wouldn't worry about it," she said. "You're still alive, so I'm sure he'll forget about it soon! But I have to ask you a question, if you would be so kind."

Slightly dazed, he nodded. Kagome felt a small pang of sympathy.

"I am looking for a hime named Machiko. Do you know of her?" she asked cheerfully.

To her disappointment, Hiro shook his head. "Er, no. I have not heard of such a hime."

Waving the sinking feeling away with a hand, Kagome shrugged. "That is fine. I just wanted to ask." Sitting back, she smoothed her hakama, and held her head up high. "Now, tell me about this boar youkai."

* * *

The small collection of village girls was giggling about him again. He could hear them. And if they said one more thing about his sexy ears, he was going to slice them into pieces, promise or no promise. Sesshoumaru supposed that ears could, theoretically, be quite erotic, but that generally had little to do with the shape and more to do with what one did to them. Whether they were pointed youkai ears or rounded human ears was completely irrelevant. Myouga, on his shoulder, was sniggering.

Ostensibly, the gaggle of young women was hiding in a doorway and waiting to see the miko demolish the youkai that had plagued their village, but they seemed more interested in the youkai who wanted nothing more than to flee than the one that wouldn't stop hounding them. Which, if Sesshoumaru remembered his father's vague talks about females, was just in their nature. Pay attention, and they wanted you to leave; ignore them, and they'd fall at your feet. Sesshoumaru wondered who had designed such a ridiculous creature; surely they should be reprimanded for such an unimpressive job. The beginnings of a headache pooled at his temples.

He kept his eyes focused on Kagome and tried to drown out the high-pitched whispers about his - apparently - well-shaped face. The miko was standing at the edge of the town and facing the direction from which the boar usually attacked, bow and arrow in her hand. Sesshoumaru noted that she was favoring her non-injured foot, and wondered just how brave a face she was putting on for the sake of the villagers. It was folly to go, wounded, into a

battle in which one did not know the enemy. Myouga had tried to tell her this, but she had brushed him off, saying that she needed to do this because her spiritual powers came with an obligation. Sesshoumaru secretly suspected that she was doing this merely because she didn't want to sleep on the ground in the cold for another night.

High above, the moon shone in the sky, and a frigid breeze was lifting the long, black ponytail that hung down her back.

Kagome was freezing and extremely nervous. She'd never really taken on a youkai by herself before. The youkai at her back might have made her less anxious if she hadn't slowly happened upon the realization that he never made any actual promises to protect her, and the cold wasn't helping her jitters any. Her fingers were numb, her lips felt as though they were about to fall off, and her nose was running. She sniffled a little bit to clear it, but only succeeded in causing it to run a little faster. Come on, she thought. Let's get this over with so I can go to sleep. Unfortunately, the boar was not cooperating.

Positive thoughts, positive thoughts. How about, when it shows its stupid face, I'm going to kill it extra, just for good measure, she thought grumpily. Flexing her toes, Kagome reflected that she had been in a perpetually bad mood for the majority of her time here, and found she didn't like it. The sullen demeanor with which she was attacking this task was not very characteristic of her, but, she reasoned, anyone would be slightly put off by such a mission. The only thing that comforted her was the presence of Myouga; at the moment, Sesshoumaru was more stressful than comforting. She wondered if he would leave after tonight. Part of her wanted that - no more unnerving stares, no more moments of heart-stopping terror, no more awkward silences - but the other part of her was glad for his company, however stoic and overbearing.

Kagome shook her head and tried to concentrate. The silence of the forest in front of her was beginning to become unsettling, and she'd traveled in enough forests to know that silence was much, much worse than sound. The light giggling and vague, somber prattle of the villagers behind her was also beginning to grate on her nerves. She was certain they were talking about her; maybe criticizing her stance, maybe laughing at her strange mannerisms. Teetering between humiliation and anger, Kagome tried to dismiss it as paranoia, but the feeling persisted. God, for a bed, she sighed inwardly. A

warm, soft bed, with sheets and a pillow and my teddy bear, Mr. Hugglebuns... Homesickness clawed at her stomach. She wondered what her mother was doing right this moment. Cleaning dishes? Sewing? Chatting with her grandfather?

I wish I could be with them, she was thinking, when a noise cut through her reverie.

Actually, it was not so much a noise as the hint of a noise. The light, non-noise of footfalls in the distance, and Kagome snapped to attention, suddenly on high alert. Straining, she could hear the crash of something heavy, coming toward her. The knot in her stomach tightened.

"Right," she muttered out loud, voice sounding low and gravelly to her own ears. "Come and get it."

She didn't have to wait long.

It came through the trees suddenly, branches breaking away before its hooves. It was huge, with gleaming tusks and ribbons of drool swinging from its jowls; even its bristles looked black and barbed. It's small, piggy eyes were glowing crimson, and as it paused at the edge of the forest, it swung its great head ponderously from side to side, surveying the village and the people who had come to see. Kagome could feel it watching her - evil, and looking for blood. Kagome took an involuntary step backwards in fear.

Which turned out to be a mistake as a bright lance of pain shot through her ankle. She stumbled a little, regained her footing as the boar lowered his head, raised her bow and drew the string, and the youkai tilted in her direction and thundered forward.

Be calm, breathe in, breathe out, she thought frantically, her mind going fuzzy with panic. Breathe in, breathe out… release…

The string whipped by her ear as the arrow flew, and she felt the bow twist in her hand as she watched the glowing projectile arc through the air, up and then down, bright and true -

The boar sidestepped neatly, and kept coming.

Kagome shrieked and pivoted out of the way, and she could feel her hair brushing the boar's side as her fingers groped in her quiver for another arrow. Suddenly she was no longer cold, but burning. Swiftly she slid another arrow into place with trembling fingers as the boar turned in his tracks, digging up furrows in the ground as it changed direction, and charged again.

Too slow, she thought despairingly, as, seemingly in slow motion, she slid the arrow home, and the boar trampled past her. As it went by, he slipped a tusk between the bow and the string, pulling it with him.

"Oh!" she cried, the bow whipping out of her hands so quickly it burned against the skin of her palms. The youkai was just toying with her, she knew, and this time there was no one to help her, no one to scoop her up and take her away from the danger. Distantly, she could hear the screams of terrified villagers, no doubt running and seeking cover while she stood, alone and shaking with paralyzing fear, to face the boar.

Sesshoumaru watched the swift battle play out. The youkai was much faster than it looked - its enormous weight belied a surefootedness that would have been unnatural on a normal boar. The miko had already cried out twice, and had stumbled once. Next to his ear, Myouga was yelling urgently, telling him to help her, to save her.

But something in her scent made him wait. Something shining, that smelled like waterfalls and sunlight, different from her normal scent. Something strange, and almost uncomfortable to him. Sesshoumaru stayed where he was, and gazed at her stoically as the boar wheeled around for the last charge and she fell to the earth.

Kagome felt the jarring impact of the ground against her knee, the vision of the giant boar youkai vibrating a bit with the sudden hit before clearing again. She was panting hard, trying to regain her breath, never taking her eyes from her opponent, but now bereft of a weapon. In the piggy eyes, she could see triumph. Leisurely, the boar tossed his head and trumpeted.

It was taunting her.

A sudden wave of anger crashed down, washing over her shoulders and

through her chest, hot and burning, and in her heart, Kagome felt rage flare up, burning her where she knelt. Her ragged breathing, scraping against her throat, came faster and faster as the boar lowered its head a final time, and ran.

Just her breath and her heart could be heard, drowning out the sound of cloven hooves, and her fingers curled involuntarily around her itching palms.

"No," she whispered, alone at the edge of the forest. "No."

The youkai soared at her, and Kagome's hands flew in front of her, and in her limbs she felt her power growing, pushing outward, unable to be denied.

"NO!" she screamed as her fingers flared with power, and then the youkai was bathed in light, screaming his own scream, as his body was thrown back and his flesh burned away.

It carried on screaming for a long time, well after Kagome's shoulders slumped and her hands fell to her sides, exhausted.

Sesshoumaru approached her slumped figure, measured steps evenly covering the ground between them. The heavy sound of her panting reached his ears as he stopped, slightly to the side and behind her. From his shoulder, Myouga hopped down his sleeve and onto the miko's bent knee.

"Kagome-sama, that was magnificent!" the flea cried, bouncing up and down on the red fabric. "Truly magnificent! Inuyasha-sama would have been proud! Wonderful! Excellent!"

Kagome made no move to indicate that she had heard, though this did not stop Myouga's effusive praise.

"Beautiful! Midoriko-sama could not have done better herself! That was just fabulous!" the flea cried, lost in his own excitement. "You have performed a difficult task, and you did it well! Sesshoumaru-sama," Myouga turned to him, "do you not think so?"

Sesshoumaru had to admit the sudden burst of pure light had been a sight to see, and was glad that he had been behind the miko, rather than in front. He

shrugged. "Impressive," he remarked, coolly regarding the boar youkai thrashing fifty meters away, noticing that the trees had stopped its flight through the air. A grim smile tugged at his lips. He knew from experience that trees hurt quite a bit.

"See?" Myouga was saying eagerly. "Even Sesshoumaru-sama, who is a great warrior, thinks you did well!"

"Really," Kagome breathed, but she did not sound happy. Myouga immediately stopped in mid-bounce.

"Kagome-sama?" he asked, worry tingeing his voice. "Are you all right?"

Instead of answering, the miko clambered to her feet, tossed her frazzled hair over her shoulder, and wheeled in her tracks to face Sesshoumaru, who was mildly shocked to find her face completely flushed.

"You," she cried shrilly. "What the hell did you think you were doing?"

A slight widening of the eyes was all he would allow himself to show of his shock at her audacious tone. Sesshoumaru wondered if it was a trick question. "Nothing," he told her. He noted with interest that her hands were clenched into fists at her sides.

"That's right! " she cried, as if she had just proved a point. "You did nothing, while I almost got turned into road kill by an overgrown pig with a miko fetish!"

To punctuate her accusation, the boar screamed again. It was clearly in agony, a state of being that Sesshoumaru usually supported wholeheartedly, but the cries were getting on his nerves. So was Kagome.

"Who the hell do you think you are, just standing by while I almost get my bones ground into little tiny pieces?" she was saying. "Why didn't you help me? I risked my damn life, and all you do is stand around looking bored!"

Sesshoumaru blinked, failing to see the connection between her fight and his inaction. Surely she didn't expect him to take responsibility?

Her finger flew up and pointed at him accusingly. "Just like that!" she cried.

Sesshoumaru suspected that he had missed the point of the conversation somewhere back down the road. "What?" he asked, completely perplexed.

To his continuing shock, the miko stamped her foot like a spoiled child. "Like that! " she reiterated. "You look just like that! Like you can't be bothered to care about anything. You know me, and yet you didn't help! Why? Because I'm human? Because I'm a miko? Because I'm tainted by your brother? Why? "

Abruptly cutting herself off, Kagome took a slight step backward and crossed her arms, waiting for an answer.

Having considerable difficulty grasping Kagome's string of thought, Sesshoumaru seized the only part of her barrage of words that he actually understood and clung to it like a lifeline. "I always look like this," he informed her. In the background, the dying pig squealed again.

Kagome lost it. Cold, sick, injured, and alone, she was suddenly sick to the bone. "Oooooh!" she squealed. "You jerk! "

"I beg your pardon?" the youkai lord said coolly, his voice low and dangerous, but Kagome was past the point of caring whether or not she offended him.

"You heard me!" she cried, shaking finger still pointing at him. "You just stood there while your companion almost got killed," she accused. "Is this how you treat your allies?"

Sesshoumaru felt his jaw clench as he took a step forward and leaned in. Theatrically, he sniffed the air.

"And what the hell are you doing?" Kagome demanded.

Ignoring her, he took another long whiff. "Oh!" he said in mock surprise. "What's this I smell?" He sniffed again as she took a step backwards, and then straightened, putting a look of slight shock on his face. "Why, I do believe it is the stench of hypocrisy!" he exclaimed. "Someone is ranting on about allies when she does little or nothing to contribute to her companions' welfare or protection! How terribly odd."

"Oh!" Kagome cried. Her brain was pointing out with great, detached interest, that Sesshoumaru had lost his famous composure. Oh, look, her mind said. Those lines on his face are going all jagged, perhaps we should step away? Kagome ignored it and plunged on. "I do believe we have a contender for World's Biggest Jerk," she said. "Someone attached himself to me, not the other way around, without even asking me if it was all right, and then when something happens to me, he does nothing! Astonishing!"

Golden eyes narrowed down at her. "Someone," Sesshoumaru bit out, "made no stipulations that I should act to protect her in such a situation."

Blue eyes narrowed right back at him. "And someone," Kagome hissed, "should use some common sense!"

"Oh, well, if we're talking about common sense, one might point out that a certain miko went into battle already injured and without proper knowledge of her enemy's capabilities."

"One might also point out that a certain youkai could have very easily dispatched said enemy!" Kagome shot back.

"A certain miko did not ask."

"A certain miko was too busy trying not to get killed! "

The sharp sound of someone clearing his throat sliced through the tension in the air. Both Kagome and Sesshoumaru whirled around and glared at the intruder, who turned out to be the headman.

"Yes, Hiro-sama?" Kagome said testily.

The headman laughed nervously. "Um," he said, his voice high and strained. "I am loathe to interrupt you during such a spirited discussion, but could one of you perhaps finish killing the boar?"

Both Kagome and Sesshoumaru stood stock still for a long moment. Then, with great restraint, Sesshoumaru walked the fifty meters to the twitching

youkai, and sliced neatly through its neck with his claws.

The boar died shortly thereafter, and Sesshoumaru gazed down at it and tried not to smile at the unfamiliar, thrilling sensation of anger. Not sullen, cold anger, but high, burning anger that would soon dissipate, and he almost laughed out loud as a fragment of memory floated down to him. His mother, smirking at him as he seethed over some perceived slight from a childhood friend whose name he could no longer remember. "Anger is good," she told him. "It is the gods, telling you that you are alive." Flexing his claws, the youkai lord took a deep breath, and felt clean.

Behind him there was a soft footfall, and he turned to see the miko looking drained and uncertain. He could smell salt tears on her skin.

She approached him slowly. Adrenaline coursed through her limbs, causing her to tremble violently, and she couldn't believe such horrible words had come out of her mouth. How could I be so cruel and foolish? Kagome thought. Why didn't I think? The world tipped around her as Sesshoumaru turned and let his again cold golden gaze fall on her.

She wanted to cry. "Sorry," was all she could think to say.

Sesshoumaru shrugged, turned, and walked into the forest without looking back.

Kagome collapsed to her knees on the ground, and tried to regain her breath.

"Kagome-sama?"

She gave a strangled cry, belatedly remembering that Myouga had taken up her shoulder as his new perch. "Myouga-jii-chan," she sighed, looking at him through tired eyes. "I really screwed up, didn't I?"

To her surprise, Myouga chuckled. It was a warm, rich sound that reminded her of times past. A little strength returned to her limbs. "Why are you laughing?" she asked with a tired smile.

Myouga only chuckled harder and harder until he was out-right howling and in hysterics. Too tired to make the effort to cut through his laughter, Kagome

waited.

Finally, Myouga wiped his eyes. "Ah, Kagome-sama, that was quite entertaining!"

"Maybe to you," she said, "but Sesshoumaru left. I insulted him, and he left me." It was very cold where she knelt, and Kagome rubbed her arms. A thought occurred.

"Wait," she said. "Why didn't you go with him?" she demanded.

Myouga chuckled again. "He will be back tomorrow morning," he announced confidently. "He merely needs to take some time away from this village."

"He'll be back?" Kagome repeated dumbly.

"Oh, yes," Myouga replied. "He never admits it, but he likes it when people stand up to him. Like battle, only without the imminent threat of injury. Now let's go inside, it's cold out here."

"Wait a minute," Kagome said. "I thought he hated it when people argued with him. And I was so rude…"

"Kagome-sama," Myouga said warmly, "I am an old man, and I constantly insult Sesshoumaru-sama and spar with him verbally. How do you think I am not dead yet if he does not enjoy it?"

Behind her, Kagome could hear the approaching footsteps of the villagers, wary and cautious, coming to take her to a warm hut with a bed and food.

"He'll be back?" she said again.

"Yes," Myouga assured her. "Now get up. My nose is going to snap off if it gets any colder."

* * *

Exactly as Myouga said, Kagome walked out of her hut the following morning

to find Sesshoumaru waiting for her.

She had stared at him, and he at her.

"I trust a certain miko is finally awake and ready to continue our journey," he had finally said, coldly.

Kagome had studied him. If she hadn't known better, she would have thought there was a slight tilt to his lips.

"Only if a certain youkai can be troubled," she had shot back.

Abruptly, Sesshoumaru had turned his back, and began to walk away. Kagome distinctly heard him utter a small, "Hmmph!"

She grinned as she set out after him.

And now she found herself standing in the snow, fifty meters from their current village of residence, and arguing with him for what seemed like the millionth time in two weeks.

"Funny," she said, "but I thought we weren't going to be picking fights with humans since, you know, then you kill them."

As if his only aim was to upset her, Sesshoumaru yawned. "Perhaps you were too busy fiddling with your hair, miko-sama, but those humans picked a fight with me. "

Kagome ground her teeth. Sesshoumaru may have enjoyed their little exchanges, but she found them frustrating as well as slightly thrilling. "Yes, but you could have just walked away. My mother always told me that walking away from a fight takes an even bigger person than walking into one. I know that sounds silly, but they weren't really hurting your pride, were they? It's not like it was you they propositioned! So you could have just kept walking, even if they did keep calling after me. I can take care of myself, you know!"

Sesshoumaru didn't answer. Kagome had the distinct impression that she was talking to a wall, except a wall would have been more receptive. Experimentally, she extended a finger and poked him in the chest.

He wobbled ever so slightly, which Kagome found highly amusing. She did it again.

Sesshoumaru reached a decision as he stared at the falling snow: he was going to kill her.

He'd sworn that he wouldn't; in fact, he was honor bound not to do so, but after this much aggravation how much was honor worth, really? After all, no one had seen him promise to keep his claws from her throat... so actually, it was like he had never made the promise at all! Right? And he could always bring her back with Tenseiga. It would teach her a lesson, and it would be well learned, too. If only arguing with her wasn't so damn enjoyable, he would have taught her proper conduct days ago.

Idly, he wondered how long it would take her to learn the numerous lessons he required of his charges. They were relatively simple, so perhaps he would only have to kill her once for her to get it. Perhaps he should write them down for her first so she could study them.

He found he liked this idea. Sesshoumaru began to list various things he wished she'd been trained to do before he had decided to accompany her.

Do Not Aggravate the Demon. That was a good one, a nice catch-all for every situation. What else? Do Not Annoy Demon with Constant Chatter. Excellent. Sesshoumaru chose to ignore that she'd already warned him that she talked excessively, since such things only needed to be corrected. Treat Demon with Respect. Keep Hands To Self at All Times. Quit Poking Demon In Chest, Please, Thank You. That one would be particularly useful right about now...

"HEY!"

Startled, Sesshoumaru tore his gaze away from the fluttering flakes of ice and refocused on the snow-covered miko who was jabbing one surprisingly pointy finger in his chest.

Kagome watched as the demon lord slowly came back from whatever vapid planet his brain was currently occupying and refocused on her face. "Are you even listening to me?" she demanded.

Sesshoumaru blinked, and Kagome observed small chunks of snow dislodge themselves from his eyelashes and tumble softly down his cheeks. "No," he told her.

"That's what I thought." Huffing, Kagome stepped back and put her finger away, even though in the two weeks they had traveled between villages together he had never made a move to threaten her. Other people, yes; her, no.

"Sorry," she said.

He gave no sign that he had heard.

"HEY!" Kagome said again.

Sesshoumaru visibly started. "What?" he snapped.

Kagome clenched her fist. "Let's try this again. I can take care of myself, okay?"

The demon lord slowly raised one insolent eyebrow. "That is not what you said two weeks ago," he informed her.

"Excuse me?"

Sesshoumaru sniffed, and ran a clawed hand through his hair, a gesture Kagome was certain he did only to distract her. "If I recall, you were caterwauling about how you needed to be protected."

"No," Kagome insisted, "I said I might need help once in a while. There's a difference."

"Not from my point of view. One way or another, it just means I pull you out of trouble."

"Yes, but that was just small trouble," Kagome shot back. They'd only encountered one other youkai in their journey, and she had dispatched it expeditiously. Kagome felt more than equipped to deal with cat-callers.

"Small trouble?" he said lazily. "I had no idea you took rape so lightly. Next

time, by all means, encounter your trouble."

"That's not what I meant! " Kagome shouted.

"Indeed."

"I meant, I have my bow and arrows. I could have taken care of them."

"I doubt that. You can't stand to step on lizards. What makes you think you can harm a human being?" he replied.

Kagome crossed her arms. "I could have taken care of it."

"Really?"

"Yes!"

"Doubtful."

"Oooh !" she squealed. "You know, you are really pissing me off right now. Why are we even out here in the first place?"

"Because you did not want the villagers to hear your nagging?" Sesshoumaru postulated.

"No. Because you couldn't keep your stupid growling to yourself!"

"And you cannot keep your ridiculous opinions as your own counsel."

Kagome seethed. "My opinions are not ridiculous!"

"As your… what did you say? Ally? Yes. As your ally, I feel compelled to point out that your opinions give rise to silly notions like taking care of insolent guards all by yourself even though you have deep moral objections to taking the life of a caterpillar."

"And as your ally, I'm trying to keep us out of trouble long enough to-"

At the edge of her hearing, there was a rustling, and she knew someone was

behind her. "Excuse me?" a feminine voice piped up, confirming her suspicions.

"Now what?" Kagome yelled, and pivoted in the snow to face the intruder.

The sight that greeted her eyes and the slipperiness of the ice beneath her feet would have caused her to end up sprawled on the ground had Sesshoumaru not caught her around the waist and kept her from falling any further than into his side.

In front of her was a very young, very pregnant girl with impossibly long black hair and wide eyes. Even before she said anything, Kagome knew who she was, and all around her, she felt the long forest strolls and pleasant, annoying bickerings grind to a sudden halt.

Inexplicably, she felt sad.

In front of them, the girl opened her mouth. "Please forgive me," she said, gaze settling on them like a mantle. "I am Machiko, and I'm looking for the miko Kagome." She looked away, seemingly slightly nervous. "Um… they said I would find you here? Are you Kagome-sama?"

I'm wearing miko clothes, aren't I, genius? Kagome wanted to say, but refrained.

Beside her, Kagome heard Sesshoumaru snicker slightly, clearly thinking the same thing, and she sighed.

Well, she thought cheerfully. At least he didn't sleep with her!

It was going to be a long night.

Chapter Fourteen

"A sudden blow: the great wings beating still
Above the staggering girl, her thighs caressed
By the dark webs, her nape caught in his bill,
He holds her helpless breast upon his breast."
-- William Butler Yeats, "Leda and the Swan"

"That day
I was stuck at home, as usual, while
she got to moon around the lake
supposedly picking lilies for dye."
-- Katharyn Howd Machan, "Leda's Sister and the Geese"

* * *

If there is anything better than a full belly, a warm fire, and free blood, I don't know what it is, thought Myouga, dozing in front of the flames. The old flea was feeling surprisingly contented.

It had been a good two weeks, even if the arguing was beginning to get on his nerves. His life hadn't been threatened, no one had squished him lately, and now that he was traveling with Kagome-sama he seemed to eat better and sleep more soundly. Now if only his two companions would shut up for more than an hour, life would be good.

A slight frown passed over his face. Since their first verbal battle, the arguments had escalated in frequency and volume, and while they were entertaining to watch as both struggled for the upper hand, Myouga couldn't help but feel that they broke the peace a little too often. Kagome-sama and his master seemed to enjoy pushing each other's sore spots at decibels loud enough to wake the dead, though at least now they had taken to wandering a little further away from the villages when the temptation to indulge in verbal sparring was too great.

All things considered, the bickering was a curious phenomenon, wrapped in the mystery of the situation. Myouga was still uncertain as to why

Sesshoumaru had decided to follow Kagome, but he suspected that it had something to do with the demon lord's profound boredom and Kagome's puzzling nature. It wasn't that she was particularly interesting or fascinating, but that she sometimes did things that were incredibly bizarre and out of synch with the rest of the universe. He had witnessed it himself, those long years ago: her friends would listen to her or follow her lead not because she was clever or engaging, but out of sheer curiosity as to what she would do or say. She would babble about tests, or schoolwork, or things that just didn't make sense to any of them until she explained how things in her time worked, and even then her friends were usually left more confused than when she started and would merely nod. She was quietly unpredictable, always getting attacked or kidnapped, always jumping into the heart of a situation. Events always happened when she was there; the world was more exciting when she was around.

As near as Myouga could tell, people liked to be around Kagome just to see what in which mess she would end up in up to her neck next. Sesshoumaru, however, happened to other people; nothing ever seemed to occur unless he instigated it, so the idea of events falling into place rather than being painstakingly aligned was probably a novel concept to him. Myouga suspected that his lord followed Kagome just so he could be a spectator for once.

Of course, there was also the fighting. But as to that, Myouga mused, Sesshoumaru would most likely agree that there were worse ways to spend one's time than winding up a lovely young lady, causing her to flush prettily, and then engaging in a spirited discussion with her.

Myouga tilted his head and listened for the sound of a heated exchange, but it appeared that they had calmed down for the time being. Perhaps they had given up and were lobbing snowballs at each other. All the better, he decided. Maybe he could get some rest for once without one of them forcibly trying to insert the last word while the other was asleep.

Letting his eyes slide closed, Myouga left off his thoughts and concentrated on the crackling fire and its cheerful warmth that shielded him from the bitter cold outside. He could smell the clean non-scent of snow on the slight breeze that came through the hut, and it was wonderful. The world always seemed more at peace when there was snow on the ground. Myouga let his mind wander and drift between sleep and waking.

Only a scant few seconds later, a frustrated-looking Kagome tossed aside the flap hanging over the door and stomped her snow-covered feet all over the floor, jolting him awake. She was closely followed by Sesshoumaru, who wore a faintly amused expression and who paused inside the door to shake himself slightly, shedding flakes of snow.

"Ah! Sesshoumaru-sama! Kagome-sama! It is good to see you—" he began, but before he could continue Sesshoumaru stepped to the back of the hut and the flap moved aside again. This time, the girl who entered was a stranger. Heavily pregnant, she tottered inside, and a slender servant dogged her heels. To Myouga, the poor maid looked as though she couldn't lift a bowl of rice, much less aide a pregnant woman, but he admired the fact that she stayed close to her mistress, hands fluttering as if she expected her charge to topple over at any moment and wasn't about to be caught unprepared, even if they both went tumbling to the floor.

Kagome lowered herself to the ground and folded her hands in her lap while Sesshoumaru slid his own hands into his sleeves and stood off to the side. There was an embarrassed silence as the pregnant girl struggled to lower herself as well, and Myouga heard a distinct sigh of relief from the miko as the woman finally settled into position.

Embarrassment flamed in Kagome's cheeks – she hadn't thought about the difficulty of sitting down on the floor, and she wished she had a chair to offer Machiko. Alas, such things were not meant to be. All in all, it was probably best to try to get things over with.

Shifting a little Kagome, smiled at the girl – she couldn't have been more than sixteen – and then bowed. "How may I be of service, Machiko-sama?" she asked politely.

She was answered with silence. Questioningly, she straightened after a moment and gave the hime a puzzled look.

Then Machiko burst into tears. Her maid immediately leapt to her feet and began to fuss.

Kagome was horrified. After a second of sitting still, she scrambled for her

backpack and withdrew a handkerchief, which she held out to the sobbing girl. "Forgive me!" she said desperately, ineffectually nudging at the girls hands with the square of cloth. "I did not mean to upset you!"

The maid, still fluttering like an extremely fretful butterfly, batted Kagome's hand away. "She's been like this for the last five months!" she cried, limbs akimbo in her consternation. "I swear I am at my wit's end!"

Machiko began to cry harder.

"It's okay! It's all right!" Kagome tried to reassure the girl, patting her on the hand. Oblivious, the hime began to wail, a high-pitched keening sound with an effect akin to fingernails on a chalkboard. Turning, Kagome cast a desperate glance at Sesshoumaru, who was leaning against the wall and staring off into space, paying no attention. Useless man, she grumped mentally, and turned back to the sobbing hime.

Sesshoumaru studied the cracks in the wall of the hut and tried not to think about either the high-pitched wails, or the ripe scent of the girl. Normally the smell of a pregnant female was a soothing one to a male, but in his mind there was the tickling, disquieting knowledge that the girl was swollen with a hanyou child. A half-demon, with tainted blood and a hard life ahead. Unbidden, he wondered if the father of the child was like his own father, shrouded in shadows and secrets, with a whole new life hidden away, built in silence as his other life crumbled. He wondered if this youkai had been forever unknown and unknowable as well. He wondered if some family wasted their love on him, too, oblivious to the thousand tiny lies that obscured the truth of him.

In his chest, there was a familiar sting, like the fangs of a viper sinking into his heart. No matter how many decades passed between remembrances, it always felt the same. It was as if on that day when he discovered all those secrets someone had painstakingly chiseled a command into his brain, telling him that it would always feel like this; that no matter how different the world would be when the memory trailed its fingers over his soul, this one thing would never change.

Sesshoumaru stifled a growl and forced his mind into a blank.

Kagome, oblivious, frowned unhappily at the still-sobbing girl. There seemed nothing for it but to wait for her to calm down – any attempt at soothing might set her off again. Snagging the sleeve of the maid, Kagome made a furtive gesture, indicating that she take a seat, and the maid, clearly used to this, sighed in resignation and plopped down as Kagome sat back and slowly counted to a hundred.

Still sitting on the floor, Myouga was finding the entire debacle extremely entertaining, and not half heartening either. This must be the hime she was looking for, he surmised. It will be an incredible stroke of luck that we have found her. If she stops crying, that is.

Kagome continued counting slowly. At eighty-seven, Machiko's sobs had slowed to only a few every ten seconds. Kagome took this as a good sign and inhaled deeply.

"Hime-sama?"

Wide, bloodshot eyes met hers, and the hime sniffled mightily. "My apologies, miko-sama," she said, although the stuffed nose made it sound like, "By abologies, biko-saba." Kagome narrowly avoided laughing outright and forced her expression into one of concern.

"It's no problem," she assured her. "Please, tell me what's troubling you."

Machiko sniffled again. "Well," she said. "I don't quite know how to say this, but now that I have met you, I think you will understand." Kagome noted that her eyes flickered in Sesshoumaru's direction as she took a deep breath.

"I am pregnant with a youkai's child."

Remembering to look slightly shocked, Kagome nodded sympathetically, indicating that she continue.

Machiko shook her head. "I can't believe it, even now," she said, placing a hand on her cheek and Kagome noted with alarm that her eyes were again filling with tears. "It's just so sudden!"

Next to her, the maid surreptitiously rolled her eyes. Kagome pressed her lips

together. "And?" she said, impatient for the girl to get the story out so that they could arrive at the point with rather more expedience.

To Kagome's intense chagrin, the young hime pressed a hand against her forehead. Her long, midnight blue sleeves fell back from her wrist, further exposing the kimonos beneath. "It was so romantic, the way we met!"

I'll bet, Kagome thought uncharitably.

"I was separated from my friends, and got lost in the woods, and the next thing I knew, I heard a loud noise and I ran!" She heaved another indelicate sob. "And then I hurt my foot, and I cried, and then…" A few tapered fingers reached up to dramatically dash a tear away. "…and then, he came through the trees."

The hime paused, remembering dramatically. Kagome had to force herself to not let her mind wander.

"It was love at first sight!" the girl gushed. "He walked over to me and asked me if I was all right, and I could not answer. I was struck dumb, and even though I was sore afraid, he made me feel safe." She sighed. "He was so handsome, and strong, and handsome, and smart, and handsome—"

Kagome felt in danger of losing control of the conversation. "How did you know he was a youkai?" she asked quickly, interrupting her.

Machiko didn't seem to mind. "He had the cutest pointed ears!" she exclaimed. "Oh! And a tail. I think he was a mountain dog youkai in disguise."

Frowning, Kagome tilted her head to the side. "You mean you don't know?" she asked incredulously.

On the face of the hime a furious blush rose, and she cast her eyes downward. "Well," she said shyly, "we didn't really have time for talking."

Behind her, Kagome heard Sesshoumaru cough, just a little bit. So you are listening. Kagome kept her face carefully neutral and began to mentally list the parts of his body that she was going to purify first.

"I see," she said after a moment. "And what is it you wish of me?"

The hime's lower lip began to quiver perilously again, and her maid put a soft warning hand on her thigh and spoke in her stead. "Miko-sama," the maid said gravely, "perhaps we could talk about this just between women?" With a significant raise of her eyebrows, she glanced at the stoic youkai propped against the back wall.

Kagome bit her lip, unsure as to how to go about explaining the delicate situation, but for once Sesshoumaru seemed to comprehend the sensitive subject. She felt him brush by her, and watched as he swept out the door and let the flap fall into place behind him. It was likely that he would listen in anyway, but Kagome decided that neither of her guests really needed to know that.

Once the maid deemed Sesshoumaru to be out of earshot, she leaned in closer. "As you may have noticed, miko-sama, Machiko-sama is heavily with child."

Glancing at the distended belly of the hime, Kagome assessed that Machiko was, indeed, extremely pregnant, and would probably be giving birth any day now. Frowning, she nodded, not comprehending why the maid looked so grim, and Machiko so devastated. "I have noticed," she conceded. She watched as the maid's lips thinned into a line.

"Then you should also know that this incident occurred only five months ago," she said. "And yet the hime looks as though she is at the end of her term. The youkai's child is growing faster and larger than a human child." Rocking back on her heels, she leveled a stern gaze at Kagome.

"We fear that the consequences of bringing this youkai child to its full term may be dire."

Machiko let out another choked sob.

"We do not know what to do. Please, give us guidance, miko-sama."

Kagome felt like someone had thrown her into a cold lake, and she was treading water, out of her depth. Biting her lip, she looked down at her hands and fiddled with her sleeves.

She had assumed that the hime was ready to give birth to the child, but it seemed that the baby was too large and too robust for the small girl to handle. In her own time, the child would have been delivered by caesarian section and placed in intensive care, but here there were no such things, and Kagome knew better than to try any sort of major medical operation without training. She could patch up wounds, but not create them, and even if she could she certainly would not do it without assistance, sterile instruments, and anesthesia.

It seemed that one or both of them would die.

And yet…

There were many hanyous, and many women who gave birth to them without dying. Kagome wondered if mountain dogs were special in some way, or if this was a common phenomenon, and if it was, how was it usually dealt with?

She raised her head again. "Could you excuse me?" she said brightly. "I have to go ask my companion something!" Giving them no time to answer, Kagome clambered to her feet and trotted out the door.

As it turned out, Sesshoumaru hadn't even been trying to be discreet in his eavesdropping; she found him crouched outside the window with his back to the door. His head was tilted with one pointy ear pricked in the direction of the conversation. She imagined that if he'd had a cigarette, he would be a perfect shoe-in for a bizarre, cosplaying assassin on a stakeout.

Not entirely comfortable with giving him a kick, she settled for clearing her throat softly, which caused the demon lord to pivot very slowly in the snow. If she hadn't known better, she would have thought he looked sheepish. Rolling her eyes, she jerked her head toward the trees behind the village before slushing through the snow in that direction, and Sesshoumaru rose and followed her.

"This is familiar," he commented dryly as they came to a halt in the spot where, not half an hour previous, they had been lobbing heated arguments back and forth. Kagome was not in the mood.

"Tell me what you know about birthing hanyous," she demanded.

Whatever he had been expecting, it was not this. "What?" he asked, confused.

Kagome looked to be in a bad mood, and frowned at him. "I said, what do you know about birthing hanyous?"

Sesshoumaru's mind went curiously numb. "Nothing," he supplied.

Stomping her foot, the miko gave him a glare. "You don't know anything about them? Are they bigger than normal human babies, or is this one an anomaly?"

Sudden relief flooded him. "Yes," Sesshoumaru answered quickly. "They are generally larger. It is common knowledge."

With great effort, Kagome let that slide. "How is it handled then?" she asked.

Shrugging, the youkai inspected his seemingly perfectly manicured hands. "Usually there is some sort of medicine that the mother takes in order to induce birth at the sixth moon cycle that also helps her survive."

"Do you know where to get that medicine?" Kagome asked.

Sesshoumaru shook his head. "No, it's usually specific to the youkai tribe involved," he told her. "Which might be difficult, as the young lady in question appears to be a tad frivolous."

Sighing heavily, Kagome concurred. "Yeah. My mother always told me to get a name and phone number. You'd think this girl would have at least figured out his species."

The youkai lord didn't answer, merely raised his eyebrows.

Kagome ignored him and nudged some snow around with her foot, thinking.

Eventually she reached a conclusion. "I suppose… I'll have to go find this tribe," she said, resignation in her voice.

"This is an option," Sesshoumaru replied.

Kagome shot him a look. "Do you have a better idea?"

"No."

"All right then," she said. "Then we'll do it. What do you know about mountain dog youkai?"

Shrugging elegantly, Sesshoumaru pursed his lips ever so slightly. "They live a little further north from here, perhaps a few days walking time," he supplied. "There are several tribes, so it might take more time than you are willing to invest, but it should not be a problem finding the right one if given a better description of the youkai in question."

"Right!" Kagome said firmly. "She must have had a good look at him, right?"

In response, Sesshoumaru arched one eyebrow even higher. Suddenly extremely uncomfortable, Kagome whirled in place and stomped off through the snow and back to the hut, glowing as red as a traffic light and trailing a highly amused youkai in her wake.

Throwing the flap aside and stomping into the room, Kagome noticed the hime and the maid jump apart from an apparently short and heated discussion. "I need a description of the father," Kagome announced. "I have been informed that a medicine is available that will assist in the birth, but that it is specific to the tribe in question, so I need to find him." With a flourish, she sat down in her place, reached into her backpack, and pulled out a notepad and a pencil so she could take down the pertinent information. Sesshoumaru chose that moment to come through the door and resume his brooding pose against the wall.

To Kagome's intense irritation, the hime looked at him with tears in her eyes. "Thank you, my lord!" she exclaimed, bowing in his direction. Kagome frowned, but tried to shove her annoyance aside.

Sesshoumaru, being himself, said nothing.

The hime continued staring at him rapturously. "A description, please?" Kagome finally interjected, when it seemed no information was forthcoming.

Startled, Machiko turned back to her. "Oh! Yes…" she said. "Um… he had long dark brown hair… and green eyes… he wore armor and had a brown tail and cute little pointed ears and cute little fangs…" She trailed off, appearing to think for a moment, although Kagome suspected that all her appearances of thought were merely for show.

"Oh! And he had a scar, running from here –" she pointed to her left shoulder " – down to here." She ran the finger to her right hip. Kagome was no good at whistling, but she would have whistled low if she could. That was certainly an impressive scar. She scribbled that in her notebook.

"Anything else?" she inquired. The hime shook her head.

"No. He seemed to be a little taller than you, though," she offered. "I believe that is all."

Kagome nodded, dutifully copied the information, closed the notebook, and looked up to see Machiko again staring at Sesshoumaru. Kagome cleared her throat.

"Machiko-sama," she said gently as the girl redirected her attention, "I will find the father of your baby, and I will bring to you the medicine needed. I swear that both you and your child will live. There is no need to fear."

A huge grin broke across the girl's face. "Thank you, miko-sama!" she exclaimed fervently. She bowed as best she could, her maid following suit.

Kagome smiled and bowed back. "I would be honored if you would stay the night here," she said suddenly. "The night is cold, and you shouldn't be traveling in your condition."

The maid responded. "Thank you, miko-sama. That is most kind."

"I will go see if I can find some extra bedrolls for you," Kagome informed them, and rose to her feet, exiting the hut.

A quick toss-up of the headman's house later, Kagome returned carrying extra bedding for her guests and found Sesshoumaru sitting in the snow, propped

up against the side of the hut.

"What are you doing out here?" Kagome demanded, nearly dropping the bedrolls in consternation.

"Sleeping," Sesshoumaru responded. The smells of the pregnant female and her overly-nervous servant were nearly stifling inside the hut, and even though it was cold outside he had decided that he could endure it more easily than the stench that reminded him of things best left buried.

"Why?" she demanded. "There's plenty of room inside!"

For once, Sesshoumaru didn't feel like arguing with her, so he said nothing.

After a brief moment of silence, he heard her sigh loudly. "Have it your way," the miko huffed, and flounced back inside. He let her go. It was more welcoming out in the cold, anyway.

* * *

In the middle of the night, Sesshoumaru was rudely awoken by an icy hand snaking its way beneath his haori and onto his bare chest. With a valiant effort, he wisely refrained from squealing like a little girl and slapping it away.

With a tenuous hold on his dignity in place, he slowly opened his eyes to find Machiko squirming against him, giving him a deviously coy smile and looking for the entire world like a novice whore, confident in her ability to attract a client. Sesshoumaru had never seen anything so wiltingly unsexy in his life. He watched as she casually flicked an icy finger over his nipple. "Do you like that, my lord?" she breathed, possibly in what she thought was a seductive manner.

Kill her! his still-groggy mind screamed, immediately followed by, No! Mustn't kill! Wretched honor! Run away!

Within the blink of an eye he was three meters away, watching the heavily pregnant girl gradually topple over into the snow. The sight gave him a brief stab of something that, after a moment, he identified as guilt. Now on her back, she looked like a turtle that had been upended, which was a pathetic sight

indeed, sure to soften even the stoniest of hearts.

In the back of his mind, long-forgotten memories suddenly stirred gently and painfully, like the soft, seductive tremors before an earthquake. Another face melted into Machiko's, with large, pleading eyes and gentle hands. In his chest, his heart hitched painfully, and then the memory was gone, and the hime was all that remained. Sesshoumaru allowed himself to give into momentary cruelty, banishing the specter of the past.

He watched with vague interest to see if she would be able to right herself.

After several moments of struggle, she managed to prop herself up against the wall and shoot him a glare filled with daggers. Given her current condition, the glare was analogous to having his foot worried by a kitten.

"Pardon me, my lord," she said icily. "I did not mean to offend you."

Keeping his face carefully neutral, Sesshoumaru stared at her until she grew uncomfortable and averted her eyes. "What did you think you were doing?" he finally asked.

The hime threw her hands up in a helpless gesture. "I do not know, my lord," she said. "All I can say is that I have not been myself lately. Ever since… well…" She shifted, clearly embarrassed, and let a fluttering hand settle on her swollen belly. "I am not myself," she repeated. She no longer looked frivolous and flighty. Instead, there was an expression of desperation and fear on her features, as though she was looking down a long black tunnel with no light at the end.

The girl was clearly insane. Sesshoumaru decided that should he ever decide to procure children that he would go for another extended constitutional to avoid the fallout from the pregnancy.

"Leave," he told her.

To his deep chagrin, she just giggled. He stared.

"What?" he finally asked, when she wouldn't stop.

She heaved a few deep breaths, trying to get her desperate little laughs under control. "I am sorry!" she said. "It is just… I do not even know your name! I cannot believe I did that."

Sesshoumaru couldn't resist. "You did not know his name either," he pointed out.

Abruptly, the hime stopped her tittering and looked away from him. "I apologize, my lord," she said finally. "I thought you would understand." She put a hand out on the wall and began to climb ponderously to her feet.

Don't get any further into this than necessary, his brain told him warningly, but curiosity was hitting him over the head, demanding an explanation. "Why?" he inquired.

Momentarily distracted from the task of standing up, Machiko looked at him in surprise. "Your miko, of course," she said.

"What about her?"

Machiko bit her lip. "I see," she said. "Forgive me, I had assumed… Since you two were traveling together…" She shot him an apologetic look. "I had surmised that you were more than just friends," she finally told him. She was on her feet now, and for some reason she looked sad and ethereal in the falling snow.

"We are not friends," Sesshoumaru informed her.

Face grave, Machiko didn't even laugh this time. "I see," she said again. "I will leave you now, my lord. Good night to you."

The youkai lord watched as she tottered around the corner and tiptoed into the hut. When she was well out of sight he allowed himself a rare gesture and shook his head slightly before resuming his position on the ground.

He did not sleep for the rest of the night, for fear that the past would reassert itself.

Instead, he let his mind unfocus, and stared at the falling snow.

* * *

Machiko and her maid left early the next morning, bowing and thanking Kagome. As they climbed with difficulty into their carriage, Myouga, sitting on Kagome's shoulder, gave a sigh.

"Looks like we'll be heading for the mountains," he said with a hint of resignation in his voice.

Glancing at him in surprise, Kagome raised her eyebrows. "Don't you like the mountains?" she asked, turning to go inside and pack her things.

Myouga shook his head. "Not at this time of year," he told her. "It will be colder up there."

Kagome had not thought of that. "I suppose," she replied. It was probably time to layer up again, and suddenly the prospect of walking was not particularly enjoyable. She wished there was some way to take a portable fire with her, but that was probably not meant to be, and again the fairytale had screwed up the timeline. It would probably take another month before she was able to go look for Miroku and Sango, or their children, and she found the idea depressing.

"Perhaps it will not take very long," she suggested, although she herself did not believe that the appointed journey would take any less time than a month.

Apparently Myouga thought so too, as he merely shrugged. "One can always hope," he agreed. "But I will be riding inside your clothes, if you do not mind."

"Don't be a pervert," she scolded, stuffing various detritus into her backpack.

"Kagome-sama! I am offended that you would impugn my honor so!" the flea replied. Kagome just laughed as she looked up to see Sesshoumaru standing in the doorway. The laughter died in her throat.

He took no notice. "Are they gone?" he asked imperiously.

"They left just a few minutes ago," Kagome replied, and Sesshoumaru nodded.

Kagome frowned. The youkai lord looked strangely tired. There weren't any physical indications, such as dark circles under his eyes, but the way he seemed to carry himself this morning suggested that he had not had much sleep. There was a certain slant to his shoulders that implied weariness, which was worrying. She hadn't seen him look anything other than bored since that night – it seemed ages ago now – that they had spoken with each other by the fire in the woods.

"Are you feeling all right?" she asked him, concern overriding the need to get moving.

If he had been a man prone to gestures, she imagined that he would have waved a hand, brushing the question off. "I am fine."

"You just look a little tired," she continued. "Should we wait before leaving?"

Sesshoumaru was slightly startled at her declaration. He hadn't known that she would notice. "I do not wish to speak of it," he said carefully. "And if you are finished dawdling here…?"

"For your information," she huffed, "I am merely trying to make sure that we have everything." God, she thought. He's so impossible sometimes. Why do I even bother?

Sesshoumaru just shrugged and exited.

"What's with him?" Kagome hissed at Myouga.

Myouga executed a similar shrug. "Sometimes milord has trouble sleeping," he told her. "It is nothing to worry about, and he will be fine tomorrow. Though I would avoid getting on his bad side."

"Does he have any other side?" Kagome wondered, shouldering her backpack and stepping outside. She almost ran straight into Sesshoumaru's back.

"I heard that," he informed her, before turning in the direction of the North.

"Well, I'm glad you did," she shot back, hurrying to fall in beside him.

Myouga just sighed and buried under the neck of her haori as the small group began their journey to the mountains, and the sunlight peeked over the edge of the landscape, bathing them in gold.

Tales from the House of the Moon
by
Resmiranda

Chapter Fifteen

"Trust men and they will be true to you; treat them greatly and they will show themselves great." --Ralph Waldo Emerson

* * *

"If you think this is going to stop me from talking, you have another thing coming," Kagome said petulantly.

Sesshoumaru growled. "I only wish for you to cease your whining," he replied. "You were going on and on about your fatigue. Now I am carrying you. Perhaps it is too much to hope that you will ever be happy?"

Kagome huffed. "I appreciate the thought," she said, "but this really is very uncomfortable." She squirmed in her position on his shoulder, the heavy armor he wore cutting into her stomach. "Really uncomfortable," she reiterated.

Sesshoumaru said nothing.

"Unbearably uncomfortable," she tried again. "But you know, now that you're carrying me, I can talk all I want and not get out of breath. Won't that be nice?"

Sesshoumaru continued to say nothing.

"Because I know you love to hear me talk," she continued, shifting slightly and trying to prop her chin on her hand in order to relieve the weight on her stomach. "If you didn't, you would have thrown me over that cliff a long time ago."

The youkai lord clenched his teeth. "Do not think that is not an option I have considered thoroughly," he bit out.

"Ahaha!" Kagome laughed nervously. "But if you wanted to, you would have done it by now, right?"

"Perhaps it is my last resort," he replied. "For when you reach the end of my patience."

Kagome considered this. "Just out of curiosity," she speculated, "how near the end of your patience am I at this moment?"

"As near as I am to the edge of this cliff," Sesshoumaru responded.

Risking a peek to her right, Kagome assessed that they were travelling very close to the edge of the path indeed. If she hadn't been able to see the ground directly beneath Sesshoumaru's feet, she would have sworn they were walking on air.

Kagome shut up. In the neck of her haori, she heard Myouga give a sigh of relief. After a few minutes, she heard him begin to snore.

It had been five days of Sesshoumaru walking quickly and tirelessly in the direction of the north and forcing Kagome to keep up at an ungodly pace. She supposed that they had made good time. Still, when each day melded seamlessly into the next in hour after hour of exhausted stumbling through the woods, she found that she didn't care much about how far they had come, only how far they had yet to go, and that distance always seemed to stay the same: too far. Each day she woke up sore and still tired, and each night she dropped like a lead balloon into her sleeping bag, sometimes not even bothering to eat, which was always a bad move. When she woke up each morning, she didn't even have the presence of mind to complain, and she ate entire packages of dry noodles and washed them down with a bottle of water

that she usually procured through snow or through the thin ice that shrouded the streams they crossed. The water always tasted of wild things and moss, the noodles were always flavorless and difficult to chew, and each day she craved plums more and more.

Myouga was becoming a poor companion. Fleas were not meant for cold weather, so he spent most of his time sleeping in her haori. Kagome always found it disconcerting when her clothing began to snore.

And Sesshoumaru was such a pill. Kagome was glad of his company, but there always seemed to be a gap between them. With Inuyasha, his emotions had always floated on the surface, easily accessible and identifiable, and so it was easy to feel close to him and know what he was thinking. Yet with Sesshoumaru, despite their bickering, there remained a gulf, wide and seemingly impossible to traverse, and it was cold, standing alone on the edge. Kagome was sick of it.

They'd entered the mountains this morning, and had been making terrible time up the side, since Kagome realized that she'd developed a slight fear of heights and the path was narrow and difficult to navigate.

They weren't even particularly nice mountains to begin with. They were barren and chilly and the sun refused to shine with anything more than the bare minimum of effort. Watery light bathed the dull brown rocks that rose up all around her, and Kagome found it annoying that the only thing that was of any interest was Sesshoumaru's back, and that scenery never changed. Her tired mind had briefly entertained itself by imagining Sesshoumaru in different outfits or with different colored hair, but that entertainment quickly wore thin. There were only so many times she could stuff him into a maid's outfit before her imaginary vision of him lost its patience and sliced her to ribbons.

Cold, tired, hungry – she was cold, tired, and hungry so often these days – and nearly terminally bored, Kagome decided that she was due for some well-justified whining. So she'd complained, and Sesshoumaru had told her that it was either shut up and walk with dignity, or keep talking and be carried like a recalcitrant child.

"I don't think you'd do that," Kagome had said, stumbling over a rock.

"Whatever gave you the impression that I would not be true to my word?" Sesshoumaru had said smoothly as he appeared to glide effortlessly over the terrain ahead of her. "Are you calling me a liar?"

He'd been winding her up and picking a fight again, and she'd known it. Kagome was tired of fighting, but she couldn't seem to stop herself. "Yes. You are a big, fat liar. You don't like human beings, remember? Rin was the exception. You wouldn't touch me voluntarily."

"If I were you," he'd said, voice low and dangerous, "I would not speculate on things about which I know nothing."

"Yeah, well," Kagome had mumbled, a feeling of guilt nibbling at her conscience. "I still don't think you'd do that."

Sesshoumaru had heaved one of his customary sighs as he stepped lightly over a rock formation. "Once again, why not? And please refrain from all offensive suppositions this time."

"Because," she'd replied, panting a little as she'd clambered after him, "that would make things easier on me, and you'd never, ever do anything to make my life easier."

Sesshoumaru neither confirmed nor denied this accusation, merely continued to pick his way along the mountain path.

"In fact," she'd said, because she couldn't resist, "I think you go out of your way just to be a pain in the neck. You're argumentative, arrogant, grumpy –"

"Grumpy?" he'd questioned without turning around. He sounded amused.

"Don't interrupt," Kagome snapped. "Yes, grumpy, and you're always prancing around like everything is so easy for you and I have to do all the work, and it's cold and I'm tired, and I just want to get this over with, and that silly hime could have at least caught the young man's name and now I have to go looking for dog demons in the mountains when I've had my fill of stupid dog demons for several lifetimes and it's just not—"

There had been a flurry of activity, and then Kagome found herself with a shoulder in her stomach, staring at the ground moving underneath Sesshoumaru's feet, and now with the added threat of being thrown off a cliff.

Kagome was not having a good time.

Over her heart, thick, cold fatigue poured down, pooling through her center, hardening where it dropped, but even the numbness of exhaustion couldn't block out the echoing loneliness.

Beneath her hands, the cold armor burned and scraped just a little bit, and underneath it, somewhere, was the man. Below hard layers was the brother to the boy she had loved, the one-time savior of herself and her friends, and a hundred other things she had only seen in fleeting glimpses, between one breath and the next. He was her companion, but he was slippery and ethereal, like an optical illusion she could only see out of the corner of her eye, difficult to hold onto, but impossible to ignore.

And that was the crux of the problem. She couldn't write him out of the universe, couldn't make him unimportant. He was annoying, uncharitable, and cold, but aside from Myouga, he was all she had; she chattered to fill the void between them, the gulf that she was unable to traverse. Perhaps, she thought, if she filled it with her words, she would be able to cross, but instead of filling it, her tiny little thoughts tumbled over each other, hollow and meaningless, into the bottomless rift.

His silences made her more lonely than she could ever feel by merely being alone.

Several minutes passed in which Kagome chose to be uncharacteristically quiet, though she did amuse herself by watching Sesshoumaru's beautiful silver hair toss and sway with the rhythm of his stride and the slight wind. In her mind, she tried to determine just how likely it was that Sesshoumaru would make good on his threat to throw her over the edge of the cliff. He did say that he kept his word and is not a liar, but he also said he wouldn't kill me. Verdict: probably safe.

Kagome went over her line of reasoning several times before deciding that it was, indeed, sound.

"Sesshoumaru –" she began.

"Unless you are going to say, ‘please, toss me off this cliff,' I would advise that you keep your counsel," Sesshoumaru interrupted her.

"Hear me out!" Kagome said quickly. "Give me one minute, and then if I haven't convinced you to let me talk I'll shut up for good!"

Sesshoumaru sniffed. Although she couldn't see his face, she was certain he had pulled on his most bored expression, which, she had slowly come to learn, meant that he was intensely interested in whatever was going on around him.

"You have fifty paces. Please try to be interesting," he said.

Kagome took a deep breath, suddenly apprehensive. The words stuck in her throat.

After a short silence, Sesshoumaru cleared his throat. "You are wasting time, miko."

In her mind, Kagome lined up the words, so she could get them out. "Sesshoumaru," she said. "Why are we always fighting?"

There was a pause wherein Sesshoumaru presumably cast about for a snide answer. "Because you are always annoying?" he replied.

Kagome gritted her teeth, intensely aware that he was just pushing her buttons. "No," she said. "Why are we always fighting? Why can't we just have a normal conversation for once?"

Beneath her, she felt his body slow a little, as though he found walking and thinking at the same time to be a difficult task. "What?" he asked, as though he had not comprehended her words.

Sighing, she shifted slightly on his shoulder. "I mean, I…" She trailed off, realizing, for the first time, just how difficult it might be. She wanted to know him, but she had no idea how to reach him, how to climb inside his mind and wrap him around herself the way she did everyone else. There was something

there, keeping her out, and she was frustrated.

"We travel together, but I don't know you," she finally said. It was a bald statement, clumsy and crude, and she winced slightly at the inelegance of her words. "What I mean is… I guess, traveling with a companion, a little small talk is nice once in a while, without all the witty repartee. Maybe play some word games or something."

"Word games?"

"Or something. Or we could get to know each other. Right?"

Silence.

"Or… something…"

Sesshoumaru said nothing, and Kagome watched the rocky ground go past; with each step, she was more and more certain that he was going to lift her from his shoulder and toss her into the ravine. Might serve me right, she thought glumly.

Kagome opened her mouth, suddenly on the verge of tears. "Just talk to me," she said softly. "Please."

Sesshoumaru stopped walking, and was silent for a long moment. "I find conversation… difficult," he said.

"I can do most of the talking!" Kagome told him quickly, perking up.

She heard him sniff. "Of that, I am well aware."

Huffing, she twisted in his grasp. "You know what I mean," she said.

"Do I?"

Kagome wanted to hit him, but refrained, though she wondered if he had ever reached a point with anyone wherein each side felt comfortable with playful slaps on the shoulder. She suspected not; if she tried to do so, she'd pull back a bloody stump. Kagome thought briefly, trying to come up with a solution.

Suddenly, it hit her.

"Hey, why don't I just ask a question and you answer it?" she asked. "That way all you have to do is tell me about yourself. You don't have to do any thinking on your own!"

Sesshoumaru hesitated.

"Please?" she wheedled.

"Oh, very well," he said, beginning to walk again. "If it will make you happy, I will do this." His tone of voice clearly said that he couldn't believe he was submitting to her whims, but Kagome decided she would take what she could get.

She clapped her hands and laughed. "Great! First things first, though."

Sesshoumaru sounded wary. "What?"

"Thank you."

The demon stopped again. "I beg your pardon?" he asked, startled.

"Thank you," Kagome repeated. "For carrying me across this dangerous mountain. It's a lot safer than me walking by myself."

"Oh." For some reason, Kagome was struck with the notion Sesshoumaru was unused to being thanked, and she made a mental note to do it more often. "You're welcome," he said as he moved forward again.

"Right!" Kagome said. "It's kind of uncomfortable up here. Can I just ride on your back?"

"I am not a pack animal."

"I know," she assured him quickly. "It just might be a little easier for both of us. I've had a lot of people carry me places, and on the back is definitely the best way to go."

"Is it now?" He sounded amused.

"Yup," she answered. "Over the shoulder makes me feel like a sack of rice, and if you carried me in your arms, you'd just get tired after a while."

"In my arms?"

A brief vision of Sesshoumaru carrying her, bridal style, flashed across her mind, and Kagome blushed scarlet. "Not that you'd ever lower yourself to do that!" she said quickly. "I'm just saying that it is not the best option! Which is good, since you'd never do it! Which is good!"

Sesshoumaru was mute.

Her face burned. Well, this little experiment backfired in record time, she thought gloomily.

He remained silent for a while. She wondered if he was a closet sadist and liked to see her suffer. "Are you certain you wish me to allow you to speak?" he finally asked.

"Yes," she replied. "If I put my foot in my mouth, so be it."

"You must enjoy the taste of your toes, then," he said.

Before she could retort, Sesshoumaru stopped. There was a warm hand on her back, and then he was gently setting her down in front of him on the narrow path. Reaching behind his head, he pulled the heavy weight of his hair over his shoulder as he turned around and knelt on the ground, exposing the back of his armor to her as he held out his elegant, clawed hands.

"Very well," he said. "Climb on."

Awkwardly, Kagome stepped forward and braced her hands on his shoulders as she straddled his hips from behind. Even though she had assumed this position with Inuyasha a thousand times, it had always seemed natural with him; with Sesshoumaru, whose entire demeanor screamed Don't Touch, it was strange. Undignified, even.

He had been right, he wasn't a pack animal. Kagome felt bad for seemingly reducing him to this.

"Sorry," she mumbled as his elbows linked behind her knees and he straightened effortlessly.

"Do not trouble yourself," he replied. There is no one here to see."

Nodding, she leaned forward and awkwardly rested her chin in his shoulder as he turned and set out again, swifter this time. Kagome tried to remember the first time Inuyasha had carried her like this and couldn't recall. She wondered if it had been as uncomfortable as this.

Probably not, she decided, feeling a sad little smile tug at her mouth. We were probably too busy yelling at each other to care. Perhaps I've made a mistake…

She was quiet for a while, watching the long, silken strands of his hair flutter in the wind. They danced over his shoulder and then to the front again, as if struggling to return to their rightful place but never quite making it. Finally she said something.

"You can push your hair back if you want," she told him.

"But then you would be covered in it, Kagome-sama," he said, lightly mocking.

"I don't mind, I like your hair," she said.

Sesshoumaru did not seem to know how to respond to that. "Very well," he said stiffly. Unhooking an arm from her leg – an action that caused her to squeeze embarrassingly tighter with her thighs – he tossed the heavy mass behind him. It fell around her, silken and thick, though she didn't dare touch it with her hands, even though she wanted to. The desire seemed too brazen, the impulse too familiar, and even though she was close to him at this moment, he'd never seemed further away.

The heavy, glossy strands brushed the bare skin of her neck briefly, and Kagome shivered. Time for a distraction, she thought glumly.

The awkward quiet grew as she cast about for something to say to diffuse the

suddenly bizarre situation. Gazing down at his shoulder, she finally hit upon something.

"Hey," she said, "whatever happened to that giant fluffy thing you used to carry around?"

There was a slight pause. "That ‘giant fluffy thing'," Sesshoumaru replied, tone slightly miffed, "was my father's heirloom pelt. And I lost it."

Kagome frowned. "Lost it? Did you put it down somewhere and forget where you left it? Because I find that a little hard to believe. It was awfully big."

Sesshoumaru did not answer right away, and Kagome took this as an invitation to continue. "Really big. I'm impressed you carried it around so long without it swallowing you. Isn't fur heavy? Didn't it slow you down at all?"

Beneath her hands, she felt the muscles of his shoulder bunch in a shrug. "Not really," he said. "It was an honor to carry it – only the heir of the House is allowed to touch it."

"And you lost it?"

"Certain circumstances required that it be left behind," he said, appearing to choose his words carefully.

A memory tickled her mind. The first time she had seen him without it was in the firelight of her campsite, only a few months ago to her, ten years ago to him. He must have lost it at some point between when he was deposed and when he found her.

"Did it catch fire?" she asked.

There was a low sound, and after a few seconds, Kagome identified it as one of his humorless chuckles. "No," he told her. "It became too heavy."

Became too…? The ocean. Nice, Kagome. That was really slick. "Did it grow too large?" she asked, trying to make it into a joke.

"No."

They continued on. The sun hovered and fell in the sky. The wind blew. The ground passed beneath them.

Finally Kagome couldn't stand it any longer.

"Okay, you know what?" she blurted out.

"No, though I have a feeling I am about to find out," Sesshoumaru replied, staring straight ahead.

"Throw me back over your shoulder and argue with me," she said as if he hadn't spoken. "This is just too weird. I don't think I can handle this."

"I thought it was uncomfortable on my shoulder?"

"It is, but it's even more uncomfortable on your back!"

"Hm," he sniffed. "Should I be offended?"

Frustrated, she felt her hands try to clench into fists, but she just clenched handfuls of him instead, as though she was trying, through touch alone, to convey to him just how discomfiting the situation was. "No, just do it," she growled. "I don't like this at all. It was a terrible idea. In fact, it was probably the worst idea I ever had, and I give you permission to taunt me mercilessly about it as long as you put me down right now."

Sesshoumaru heaved a great sigh, and without ceremony he skidded to a stop and dropped her. Kagome hit the ground with a jarring thump, and in the neck of her haori, she felt Myouga stirring, clearly jolted out of his nap.

"Ow!" she cried. "That hurt!" Placing a hand on her bruised backside, Kagome glared up at him, and then blinked in surprise.

Brow slightly furrowed and eyes narrowing to golden slits, the demon lord looked more annoyed than she'd ever seen him.

"Kindly make up your damned mind," he bit out. He tilted his head to the side and appeared to consider something. "You insufferable woman," he added.

"I am not insufferable," Kagome snapped back. "I am merely put out."

"Then what ever it is, put it back in again," he snarled, and with lightning speed, he threw her on his shoulder, whirled around, and leapt forward.

"Eep!" Kagome squeaked as her stomach lurched. Oh, please, let me not be airsick, she thought desperately. That's all I need: another reason for him to hate me.

"Quiet," Sesshoumaru said. "You are worse than that damnable hime."

"Oh!" Kagome exclaimed, voice somewhat lost in the wind. "I am not that bad! I may talk a lot, but I'm not that brainless."

"At least she knew when to stop before she got herself killed," Sesshoumaru retorted. "I cannot say the same of you."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Kagome demanded. "You didn't say more than three words to her!"

Sudden realization dawned.

"Wait a minute…" she said. "Why were you so tired the day they left? Did you do something to her?"

"No!"

But Kagome was on a role, twisting in his grasp so she could berate him more effectively. "She was just a girl, you pervert! Okay, granted, she obviously had some experience, but EW!"

"I didn't touch her!" the demon lord snapped. "She assaulted me."

"Are you serious?"

"Unfortunately so."

"That little hussy!"

"Agreed."

"Right!"

There was a silence.

"I do believe that this is the first time I've seen you two agree on anything," Myouga said, popping his head out from beneath Kagome's collar, reminding her of his presence and her deep guilt for depriving him of his sleep.

"Sorry we woke you from your nap," Kagome replied, feeling sheepish.

Myouga shrugged. "I am certain I will be able to recapture it if you are quiet for but a few minutes."

Kagome blushed guiltily. "Sure, no problem."

"Thank you, Kagome-sama!" Myouga said happily before turning to his master. "And you, Sesshoumaru-sama, please do not say anything to upset her before I get to sleep. It's disrespectful to your elders."

"Hmph," Sesshoumaru replied as Myouga crawled under Kagome's collar again. For several minutes, Kagome bit her lip to keep from talking until she heard the pleasant sound of snores emanating from her clothing once more.

Deeming Myouga comfortably asleep, Kagome jumped at the chance to speak. For some reason, she was feeling slightly smug. "Hey, that is pretty nice," she said. She twisted against him again. "Hey, Sesshoumaru, how does it feel?"

The past few minutes had been strange ones for Sesshoumaru. He was unaccustomed to comfortable silences, but he had felt strangely content to be quiet while knowing that Kagome was also comfortable. It was ironically disconcerting for him to share such companionable calm, and he wasn't certain if he liked it. Most of his life was spent keeping other people off balance and cementing his iron hold on the upper hand; even when he was at a disadvantage, he knew where he stood. This friendly peace was strange, as though he were trying to fit himself into a space shaped differently from his normal posture. It wasn't uncomfortable, per se, but difficult to adapt.

For his part, he was thoroughly confused and frustrated, and entirely uncertain as to how to proceed. "How does what feel?" he demanded.

"Agreeing with me! Doesn't that feel nice? Rather than always arguing with me?"

Sesshoumaru pursed his lips against the wind. "I suppose there is some value in it," he conceded. "However, it is not so pleasant that I will be making a habit of it."

"Hey!"

"Also," he added, "please stop squirming, unless you wish to revisit our previous conversation regarding cliffs and your precarious position regarding them."

"You're so impossible," Kagome huffed, forcing her limbs to still, but she felt a smile on her face.

She watched the ground pass beneath his feet for a while, and marveled at how easily the simple task of moving seemed to him. Moving was usually something that required very little effort, but there seemed to be none at all involved. Inuyasha would land none-too-gently on the ground before springing away again, but Sesshoumaru barely skimmed the earth with his toes before smoothly taking off again. No wonder he always seems to be impeccable, Kagome thought idly. He doesn't have to touch anything to go anywhere.

The sun was falling faster in the sky now, the pale light turning the dull brown rocks a light gold, and it would be evening soon, and then after that it would be night. Kagome didn't even want to think about how cold it was going to be on the mountain once the sun set; she'd seen the patches of ice that clustered in the shadows, and if she had to pick a way to die, freezing to death was at the bottom of the list.

Pursing her lips in consternation, she wondered whether they would set up camp, or if Sesshoumaru would continue on through the night until they stumbled upon a tribe, if a tribe even existed on this mountain. Kagome was

the first to admit that she had no clue where they were, and she was uncertain if she would even recognize another inu-youkai if she met one. Sesshoumaru was the only true inu-youkai she knew, so she was uncertain as to whether or not there was something to look for, or if they were indistinguishable from other youkai on sight.

Of course, all of it was a moot point if they never found any. It seemed that whenever she wanted to avoid youkai, they came out in droves, usually looking for her blood, but when she sought them out they had all decided to take a collective vacation in Fiji and had neglected to invite her. The situation would have been funny were it not so annoying.

"Sesshoumaru?"

Beneath her, he stumbled slightly before righting himself.

Jolted from the pleasant lull of his stride, the demon lord mentally picked himself up and shook himself off. "What?"

"What do mountain dogs look like?" she asked. "I don't think I've even heard of one."

"Like any other dogs," he replied, regaining his momentum. "And they live in the mountains."

"Are they friendly?"

"I suppose. Although I am uncertain as to why one would come down from the mountain merely to copulate with a human female. They rarely leave their dens."

Kagome frowned. Something didn't seem quite right. "Then why?"

Sesshoumaru snorted. "I have no idea. You should ask him when we find him."

Sighing, Kagome slumped a little on his shoulder. "I don't think he'd appreciate me asking him that question," she told him.

"Most likely no," he said.

A stray thought hit her. "What if he wasn't a dog youkai? What if he was something else? I wouldn't trust Machiko to spell her own name, much less get the species right."

"Then we will probably not find him in time, and the hime will die," Sesshoumaru replied.

Kagome gasped in horror. "That's awful," she exclaimed. "Don't say things like that!"

"Why not?" he asked, puzzled. "It's true, isn't it?"

"Yes, but you don't say it!"

Sesshoumaru rolled his eyes. "Very well."

"What other kind of youkai are in the mountains?" Kagome asked, thinking out loud. "Maybe if we start here we can find the right guy."

Beneath her, she felt him shrug.

Kagome dug around in the dusty annals of her mind, trying to think of animals that lived in the mountains. "Bird youkai," she said. What else? "Bat youkai, bear youkai. Deer youkai. Dog youkai, cat youkai—"

Sesshoumaru sniffed the air. "Wolves," he supplied.

On his shoulder, he felt Kagome stiffen. "Why do you say that?" she asked, voice tight.

"Because there are three of them following us," he replied.

Kagome's mind shut down.

Sesshoumaru assessed the situation. Three wolf youkai, coming toward him at great speed, although they did not smell hostile. In fact, one of them smelled vaguely familiar. Sesshoumaru wondered where he had caught that scent before.

Planting one foot firmly on a rock, Sesshoumaru pushed off and rose into the air, looking for a spot to land where five people would not be crowded, and found it only a few leaps away, so he gently hit the ground again and made his way across the rocky landscape.

"Urk," said his passenger.

"Do try not to be ill," he told her. "It makes a bad impression."

She didn't answer as he landed lightly, and within seconds there were three wolf youkai standing in front of him, giving him cocky grins.

"Sesshoumaru-sama!" said the one standing in the middle. "Long time, no see!"

"Indeed," Sesshoumaru replied. Beneath his arm, the miko had stiffened even more. He could smell her blood, rising to the surface of her skin. Swiftly, he set her down, but she didn't turn around to greet the wolves.

Sesshoumaru sized up the situation, recognizing the wolf in front of him as an ally by scent, but not by sight. Of course, the scent did not interest him nearly as much as the sight. He let his gaze fall on the young youkai's chest.

"If we'd known you were coming, we would have sent an envoy," the leader said. "What brings you to our territory unannounced and bearing such a lovely gift?"

Sesshoumaru felt a spike of annoyance. "She is not a gift," he informed the wolf. "She is my companion for this journey." He lifted his eyes from the scar that ran from the youkai's left shoulder, beneath the breastplate, and landing at his right hip. "And what brings us here is you, apparently."

The wolf gave a nervous laugh. "Why do you say that?" he said, his voice cracking just a little.

Sesshoumaru merely smirked. Next to him, the miko turned around.

Her heart was pounding so hard against her chest she thought it would burst,

and there was ice water in her veins, pouring over her, chilling her to the bone, bathing her in cold. Kagome flexed her fingers, feeling them shake, suddenly weak and useless at her sides.

Just a moment in time, and she stood there for an eternity, listening to him talk. His voice was so familiar and so alien at the same time, but she knew this youkai. The world had narrowed down to a boundary, and once she passed it she knew she was going to either faint or cry, but she couldn't stay in this place forever.

Slowly, moving as though in a dream, she pivoted in place, and there he was. Long dark hair, pulled back into a queue, cocky grin on his face, strong hands on strong hips, just like she remembered him. He hadn't changed a bit, was still alive and laughing, still dashing around mountainsides. She didn't recognize his companions, but she knew him. She remembered him.

Licking dry lips, she forced herself to speak.

"Kouga…kun?"

But no. He looked at her, and his eyes were green, not blue, his face was slightly longer, eyes slightly wider, and in the sunlight his hair was dark brown, not black. He was frowning at her, and there was no recognition in him. "Who are you?" he said.

Kagome nearly fainted with relief.

"And how do you know my father?"

Chapter Sixteen

"The important thing when you are going to do something brave is to have someone on hand to witness it." –Michael Howard

* * *

As they moved swiftly towards the tribe den Kagome considered the merits of leaping from a cliff herself, which would certainly be better than what awaited her at the end of this trip. She hadn't told Kouga's son that his father had once tried to convince her to set up a little cave with him and raise little half-wolf cubs, opting instead to laugh nervously and mention only that they had met before. Which was the understatement of the century. He'd given her an extremely dubious look for a long moment before Sesshoumaru intervened and announced their business was with the head of the tribe. Kagome was embarrassed and headed for certain emotional upheaval, and, all in all, it might just be better if she asked Sesshoumaru to drop her and get it all over with. In fact, she decided with the curious detachment of the truly terrified, I don't think I'd mind hanging around in a valley for thousands of years as a restless ghost. I bet it's pretty here in the spring, and if I got bored I could always spy on hot wolf-boys taking baths in the streams. That doesn't sound so bad.

Sesshoumaru had thrown her over his shoulder facing forward this time, perhaps in deference to her constantly wounded dignity. He'd looped his arm out and upward so her ribcage nestled in the crook, her right arm wound around his neck to rest her hand on his left shoulder, and her other hand gripping his triceps so hard she thought she might leave bruises. Still, it was more comfortable to rest on her ribs instead of her stomach, and she was half-laid against his angled body, so gravity seemed less pressing than it usually did. As a result of this happy change in circumstances she was in the

ideal position to catch a very good view of the shapely thighs of the wolf youkai in front of her, the sight of which was probably leading her into such impure thoughts.

No, spending the rest of eternity watching them run around and getting sweaty and then possibly naked didn't seem bad at all. Except, knowing her luck, they'd all move to some other stupid mountain and she'd never see them again, and wouldn't she be sorry then? And did wolf youkai even take baths? She'd never noticed Ko – them smelling particularly fresh, but they weren't rank either. Her brow furrowed in concentration, worrying this bit of minutiae like a kitten with a piece of string. It was certainly better than thinking about the meeting ahead.

Except the meeting ahead wouldn't stop poking her insistently. She snuck a look sideways at Sesshoumaru in an attempt to discern what he thought of this situation, but he looked bored and distant as ever, so she looked away.

There really was nothing for it. She was going to have to see Kouga again.

And she wanted to see him. She really, truly did, but she wasn't certain that he would want to see her. She knew that when she saw him, older, not the young man she remembered, there was no telling what she would do. Sesshoumaru did not appear to age, but she had no idea about other youkai. Kouga could be an old, old man by now, bent and wizened, once-black hair snow white, like the hair she always liked and wouldn't trade for certain affection. She wondered if he was angry that she had left, that she had, in the end, chosen to leave him behind even though Inuyasha was no longer hers; or maybe not angry, but happy, because he obviously had a fine son and rank and all the things he wouldn't have had if he had taken her to be his "woman", as he always liked to say.

Horribly, his happiness would be worse than his anger or his sadness. Kagome wondered when she had become so selfish that she would prefer someone else's discomfort to spare her own feelings. It wasn't like she hadn't been

heartbroken and humiliated before, after all; she'd had a lot of practice. She was a student of the fine art of misery, most of it self-inflicted. How utterly disheartening.

If only she could run, except then Sesshoumaru would probably come after her and that might prove to be even more embarrassing.

"Sesshoumaru?"

Without actually doing so, he gave her the distinct impression that he had rolled his eyes. "What is it now?" he asked, not bothering to turn his head to look at her. In his voice there was an undercurrent of annoyance, and something else sharp and unidentifiable, different from the usual dull boredom or edged sarcasm.

Kagome was too worried to take issue with his tone. "Do you know Kouga?" she asked. It suddenly seemed very important to know the answer as quickly as possible and bickering would only slow her down in that quest.

She watched in fascination as a muscle leapt in his jaw. "Yes," he said curtly. He still wouldn't look at her, and beneath the skin of his neck thick tendons jumped, sharply defined in the faded light of evening. Kagome blinked. He'd been angry before, but she didn't think she'd ever seen him so tense; even she didn't inspire this reaction in him. It slowly began to dawn on her that he was grinding his teeth with extreme prejudice, and the action seemed so out of character that it was oddly mesmerizing, as if she had caught him French braiding his hair, or possibly pirouetting in the early morning meadows like some sort of armored Baryshnikov.

The mental image caused a bubbly giggle that she couldn't stifle in time. The demon shot her a penetrating glare. "Is this situation amusing to you?" he asked sharply. "Because you don't appear to be in any sort of position to be laughing."

She froze. "Why do you say that?" she demanded, dragged out of her small and fascinating world and back into reality. "What makes you think that?"

Sesshoumaru sniffed disdainfully. "I have my ways of knowing," he said cryptically.

Kagome wasn't buying it.

"What ways?" she wanted to know. The panic she had been trying to stave off with thoughts of naked wolf-boys was swelling beneath her breast now. It didn't seem very big at the moment, but Kagome knew better. Sure, it started with just a swell in the ocean, but a thousand miles later it was "dozens injured" and "property damage" and some sort of journalistic award for whichever photographer was lucky enough to capture the tidal wave of the century, and she was definitely going to start panicking unless she got answers. Just how much did Sesshoumaru know, anyway? He knew Kouga, so he might know their connection, and for some reason that thought was sharply uncomfortable. It sat in her brain, a little stinging urchin of extreme self-doubt.

"What ways?" she wheedled.

Sesshoumaru refused to answer. He looked, for lack of a better word, determinedly irritated. His lips had thinned just slightly, his brows were drawn down in consternation, and he looked straight ahead, as though anticipating a future full of necessary and tedious excitement. It was slightly unnerving. Kagome felt the fear stir again.

She cleared her throat in what was no doubt a deeply misguided attempt to remind him of her existence. He still said nothing.

"Um," she said.

Sesshoumaru stared straight ahead.

"I say," Kagome remarked lightly, "what ways?"

Sesshoumaru ignored her.

Short of wiggling out of his grasp and stripping naked to get his attention she was all out of ideas. Well, except for one idea that seemed suicidal, but, reasoning that he would probably not kill her in front of the three wolves, she decided to go for it.

Deliberately, Kagome reached over and poked him hard on his temple. "You know it's rude to ignore a question," she informed him petulantly.

For the first time since they had begun to follow the wolves, Sesshoumaru turned to look at her. He blinked, looking slightly dazed.

"What?" he said.

"Are you going to answer my question or not?" she demanded.

He didn't seem to be listening to her, but was instead studying her face with what probably passed for astonishment. "Did you just poke me in the head?" he asked, voice brimming with incredulity, as if no one had ever poked him in the head before in his life. Actually, that was probably true. Kagome felt vaguely proud to be the first - a dubious honor to be sure, but one that was no doubt rarely bestowed. Fear must be clouding her judgement.

"I did. What are you going to do about it?" she asked.

He opened his mouth to reply.

"Keeping in mind," she reminded him sharply, "that you promised not to kill me."

He closed his mouth in order to twist it in mighty displeasure. "Did I promise not to injure you?" he asked after a moment.

Kagome quickly went over the terms of their bargain and was nastily surprised to suddenly find a rather large and scary loophole. Perhaps he didn't really remember the terms of their agreement? One could always hope, right? "Er, yes," she lied quickly. "Yes, you did."

Golden eyes narrowed, and Kagome felt her heart slow to a horrified stop.

"You know, I rather think I didn't," he said. He tightened his grip around her.

With cold horror, Kagome watched as he lifted his other arm. The long sleeve fell back in slow motion, revealing his striped wrist and clawed fingers, and he reached for her, face satisfied, manner leisurely, as if he would take his time to dismantle her, and he would enjoy it –

Sesshoumaru's hand brushed her cheek, and her breath abandoned her lungs.

Then he flicked her ear.

For half a second, she was too shocked to do anything but watch as he turned his attention back to the way ahead, his extremely self-satisfied expression projecting a smugness that could have been felt through a brick wall. Then the stinging hit her.

"Ow," she said reproachfully. "That hurt, you jerk!"

"Then my objective is achieved," he answered.

"No, that really hurt!" Her own hand flew to her ear, and was relieved when her fingers failed to find a wetness there. Still.

"I don't think this is really fair," she complained.

"Whyever not, miko? Did you not grievously injure my person? Am I not allowed to respond in kind?"

Her little balled fist hit his breastplate in frustration, and for half a heartbeat his feet seemed to falter on the sliding gravel that flew beneath them, but she was too peeved to care. "First," she said, "the only thing I injured was your precious dignity, and second, you have claws. I don't have claws! You have an unfair advantage."

Sesshoumaru appeared to contemplate this declaration for a moment before giving a curt nod. "Yes," he agreed. "It appears I do." He did not seem to be very abashed at the thought.

Stupid, stupid demons with their stupid, stupid claws and stupid, stupid dirty tactics, Kagome griped mentally. She turned away from him and stuck her nose in the air as well as she could when the natural position of her head

should have been in his armpit. "And you still haven't answered my question," she announced to the world at large.

On the wind, the sound of sniggering reached her ears.

Great, she thought. Now the wolves are laughing at me. This is the most humiliating day ever, even that time in kindergarten when my panties fell down around my ankles in the middle of class, and it's going to get WORSE –

She heard Sesshoumaru give an exasperated sigh, and then his hand was on her jaw, insistently turning her toward him. It wasn't violent or painful, but she might as well have been struggling against steel. With his arm he rolled her slightly inward, so that she had to brace herself against his armored chest while he patiently maneuvered her so that her head was drawn in front of him, her ear level with his lips.

Kagome felt he was taking entirely too many liberties with her person, but couldn't find her voice to say so.

Which, in the end, was probably good, as Sesshoumaru opened his mouth and spoke low, so only she could hear.

"I know Kouga," he began, breath warm in the cold air, "but we are not fond of each other. Were it not for the mutually beneficial treaty we have, I would probably kill him."

Kagome gasped, but he continued as though she had been silent. "As for how I know you might be in a rather more uncomfortable position than we had originally anticipated, any fool could see that you are anxious. I do not know your relationship to the wolf, but I advise you to calm yourself, lest you give anything away that you do not wish to."

She worked her jaw in his grasp, looking for her voice, finding it. "Like what?" she asked, almost fearful. What else could she give away with just a glance, or a nervous gesture?

"I'm sure I do not know," he sniffed, voice rising to its normal level. Abruptly he released her chin and repositioned her in his grasp, clearly done with whatever he had to say. She tightened her grip on his shoulder, suddenly off balance and stunned into silence.

Ahead of her, she saw Kouga's son turn back around, and she realized that he had been watching their exchange. Kagome wondered if he had heard anyway, despite precautions. She was dismayed to find herself crossing her fingers and hoping against hope that Kouga would not recognize her.

She was silent for the remainder of the journey. Around them the shadows grew deeper and deeper, until night drew its long fingers over them, shielding them from the light; the air grew sharply colder, seeping into her clothing, biting against her cheeks, and drawing little tears from her eyes to be lost in the wind, in her hair, to be found no more.

Kagome felt very alone. She flexed her grip against the line of muscle in Sesshoumaru's shoulder, just to reassure herself that he was still there, still solid, hadn't disappeared. Against her back, she felt a corresponding twitch in his fingers, and then they were soaring over a valley lit with campfires, descending into the wolf camp.

* * *

Myouga let his old bones thaw out in the warmth of the fire and tried to ignore the crackling tension in the air around him. In his experience, which was long

and rather more expansive than he would have liked, tension was either eventually cracked or relaxed, and there was no use getting worked up over something that would go away given enough time, especially when it had nothing to do with him. He sighed and held his four hands to the flames as behind him Kagome stared at the dirt and Sesshoumaru waited impatiently for Kouga to make his appearance.

Across from their little entourage, Kouga's son, whose name, it turned out, was Akiyama, stared at them with an expression that straddled the border between suspicion and curiosity. He hadn't spoken more than three words since they'd arrived. Even Myouga, who liked to think that he was notoriously magnanimous, thought this rather rude, and he hoped his master was distracting himself sufficiently enough to refrain from correcting their host's behavior in a possibly very bloody way.

In some ways, the flea reflected morosely, it was an unfortunate thing to run into Kouga's clan. Certainly the hime and her son would be saved, but he found that thought cold comfort when his own life suddenly seemed to be in rather more peril than it had been when he went to sleep. Heated words would probably be exchanged at some point, and then there was the possibility of fighting, and danger, and, all things considered, he wished the fire hadn't warmed him enough to wake him. At least he would have been well rested in his last hours if he had been allowed to continue snoring. Alas, it did not seem meant to be. Very few things that involved not fighting seemed fated. Why couldn't a good meal or a peaceful retirement ever be fated? he thought. Myouga speculated gloomily as to what sort of sin he had committed to invoke this sort of karmic retribution. Whatever it had been, he was definitely thoroughly sorry.

He looked over his shoulder at his master and Kagome and gave a sigh of resignation. Sesshoumaru had pulled his customary combat facade out of his mental closet, brushed it off, and donned it as though it were enchanted armor. Even though he was seated, his shoulders hunched slightly, and though his hands were folded in his sleeves, one was left with the uncomfortable knowledge that they definitely didn't have to stay there. His expression was dark; not enough to be insulting, but definitely enough to indicate that it

would no doubt turn thunderous at the slightest provocation.

As for Kagome, she was staring at the ground, her hands resting on her knees; beside her, her satchel, quiver, and bow were laid with care. She would have been a perfect portrait of humility and modesty if she hadn't looked so miserable. Her entire body bowed inward, as though she wanted to shrink into her clothes and disappear.

They were, all things considered, an odd pair, as if the natural levels of their emotions had been knocked out of balance, and now Kagome held all their worry and Sesshoumaru bristled with their combined fury. The effect was that of a very prickly opponent who nevertheless was always on the verge of soppy tears. It was unsettling.

Myouga turned back to the fire and rubbed his hands together, trying to warm them, and wished he and his master had never left the House of the Moon. At the very least he would have a warm, soft bed...

There was almost no warning. There was only the scraping of many bodies rising to a standing position - behind him he heard Kagome scramble to her feet - and then suddenly Kouga loomed out of the darkness, slinking from the shadows to come to rest against the light. Behind him, Kagome made a strangled noise in her throat.

Dizziness threatened to over take her, and she was suddenly very, very tired. Her eyelids fluttered as though insisting upon sleep. In her bones, she felt things weigh heavy and dark across her body, things she thought she had dealt with already. Irrationally, a spark of anger flared.

She had imagined Sango and Miroku as an old couple. She had tried to wrap her mind around Shippou as an adult. She had envisioned any number of possibilities for Kouga, but all her preparation paled against the sudden shock of seeing him in front of her.

He didn't even have the decency to look shocking. He just looked fine. Older, but not haggard. There were lines on his face, but they were laugh-lines, not worry-lines, and his long black hair - still caught in it's customary que - was shot through with grey. He'd lost the headband, which, all things considered, was probably a good thing, and he seemed to have acquired more muscles from somewhere, but other than that he was him: middle-aged and healthy and sending echoes of nostalgia through the suddenly quiet confines of her head.

Then, as it dawned on her that he was really there in the flickering light of the flame, her reaction to him was so sudden and so fierce she felt her knees tremble and threaten to buckle beneath her. At her sides her fingers itched to touch him, to hug him, to reassure herself that he - maybe no one else, but he - was alive and happy and whole, had not walked down that long road into the darkness she could not reach, had not gone where she could not follow. He was here.

Her heart tangled around itself painfully. Oh, she had missed him.

Dimly, she was aware of a heavy silence, of many people who had stopped breathing at the same time. Everyone seemed to be gazing at the two of them with rapturous, bated breath, as though they were just characters in a play.

She watched in slow motion as his face melted easily into a scowl.

Fabulous, she thought. For lack of anything better to do, she gave him her best watery, apologetic smile, as if that could make up for anything.

His mouth twisted. Then he raised his arm to point at her accusingly.

"You," he said, voice half-strangled, tension in every line of his body. She had seen that stance so many times, but always when he faced an enemy. He had never, ever used it against herself, and for a second Kagome felt her stomach drop out of her body. Next to her Sesshoumaru twitched, the precusor to a movement that may or may not have been deadly. She never found out.

"You," Kouga said again, shaking his judgmental finger, suddenly looking, bizarrely, like an exasperated parent, "have some explaining to do. Later." Then he folded his arms and turned to address Sesshoumaru.

"State your business," he barked. And that seemed to be that.

Kagome felt ever so slightly cheated. She opened her mouth to say something, but Sesshoumaru had stepped forward and slightly in front of her, as though blocking her from sight could block her from thoughts as well, and she shut it again as he spoke smoothly into the silence.

"Your whelp," he announced, and Kagome thought he might be taking a little too much pleasure in this, "has sired a hanyou son."

The dimly lit darkness beyond the central fire erupted in activity. All around her, Kagome heard shuffling feet and frantic whispers, and in front of her Akiyama's face slowly drained of all color. For a moment, she felt sorry for him. Somewhere outside the circle of light, there was an eruption of laughter; she could only imagine what it sounded like to the young man who seemed in danger of fainting face down in the fire. She saw heads turn and bodies leap to their feet and take off, presumably to spread the news.

In fact, the only two demons who weren't acting shocked or amused were Sesshoumaru and Kouga himself. The demon lord looked as bland as ever, though probably only, Kagome suspected, through force of will. Kouga simply glared at him, and only a twitch of muscle in his neck belied his shock and irritation.

After a few more bursts of unkind laughter and a great deal of snickering and hushed whispers the surrounding tribe began to settle down, eager to enjoy the rest of the show. Kouga waited patiently, probably collecting his thoughts behind his stormy face. When all was finally quiet again, he spoke. He didn't even look at his son, instead keeping his eyes trained on Sesshoumaru's blank face.

"Akiyama," he said imperiously, "is this true?"

The blood which had so recently abandoned his face returned with a vengeance. Kagome watched with amazement as he suddenly glowed so red she worried he might burst a blood vessel. He opened his mouth, but no sound came out, so he closed it again. Beneath the skin of his throat, his Adam's apple bobbed as he tried to regain his voice.

Kouga did not seem inclined to wait. "Well?" he snapped.

Akiyama jerked as though slapped. "Maybe!" he managed to squeak.

A little flurry of sniggering drifted across the circle of light, and the young wolf's lips thinned in fury.

Kouga had shut his eyes. Very slowly, he raised one large, calloused hand to his forehead and began to rub his temples with his middle finger and his thumb, as though trying to soothe the situation out of his brain.

"And Sesshoumaru? What are you doing here, telling me this?" Kouga asked, not opening his eyes.

Sesshoumaru executed an elegant shrug, and turned to look over his shoulder at Kagome. She couldn't see the expression on his face, but she had no doubt he wanted her to take it from here.

She opened her mouth to speak, and was shocked to find that her voice came out calm and clear. "The hime who is carrying his son gave us his description," she said. "There is little doubt."

Kouga didn't look at her, and she felt her heart twinge, just a little. "And now that you have brought us this news, what do you expect us to do about it?" he asked.

Kagome darted a nervous glance at her companion, but he seemed to have switched his brain off in that highly irritating way of his, and was staring into the middle distance over Kouga's shoulder. She dragged her gaze back to Kouga's face, obscured by the hand that was still slowly massaging his temples. "She needs the medicine required to carry her through labor, or she and her son will die."

A smile seemed to be tugging at his lips. "Tell me, Kagome - " she felt faint " - how do you know it is a boy if he has not yet been born?"

Awkward! Kagome thought. There was a flash of something wistful in her chest, and she wondered exactly when Kouga had become so perceptive. The brash and oblivious wolf prince she had known seemed to have run away, run somewhere else from which he could never return, and left this steady, deliberate man in his place.

Kouga was still waiting. "There are ways of telling," she invented quickly, snatching an evasive page from Sesshoumaru's book.

"What kind of ways?" Kouga wanted to know.

"That's between me and her," Kagome said, endeavoring to imply that this was a female matter, not to be discussed in mixed company. The less people who knew about the stories, the better.

"Hmm," he replied thoughtfully.

Kagome remembered just in time to not bite her lip in worry, lest she give something away.

Kouga was stone still for a long moment. Then, as if he had reached a decision, he turned to his son and folded his arms across his chest. Kagome tried not to stare at the muscle rippling beneath his tanned skin and wondered in consternation when she had become such a horny schoolgirl.

"My son," Kouga declared loudly, "you depart tomorrow to fetch the herbs needed."

Akiyama leapt to his feet, leaning forward, palms turned upwards in supplication. "But - "

"But what?" Kouga asked dangerously.

The boy appeared to regain his head and straightened. "This is not my fault, father," he said as loudly as he could.

In the flickering firelight, the sardonic twist of Kouga's mouth seemed menacing. "Yes?" he said, drawing the word out.

Kagome felt like her brain was broken. If Kouga had been a woman, he would have been the spitting image of her mother when she was deeply displeased with something one of her progeny had done. It was almost funny. Almost.

Akiyama's head dropped and he crossed his arms as he mumbled something that only his father could hear.

Kouga snorted. "That is of no consequence. This is still your responsibility." He looked intensely amused.

Akiyama, on the other hand, was not happy. Angrily he spun on his heels and stalked off into the crowd, who parted for him.

"Tomorrow morning!" his father shouted after him. "When the sun rises."

What sounded like a grumbled assent came back, and then the whole tribe was howling with laughter around them. Kagome failed to see the humor in the situation, but apparently the wolves found the whole thing hilarious beyond belief.

When they had finally settled down Kouga turned and looked at his visitors again, as though sizing them up. Kagome tried not to shift nervously under his gaze; Sesshoumaru did not appear to care.

After a moment Kouga appeared to reach a decision. He turned his back on them and cupped his hands around his mouth.

"Listen up, you mangy mutts!" he yelled. "These two are our guests, so behave! For a change."

In the darkness beyond the fire, the wolves howled and catcalled, and Kagome felt very, very exposed. Unconsciously she took a step toward Sesshoumaru.

Kouga dropped his hands and waved at someone in the crowd, who stepped forward into the light. Kagome had been hoping it was Ginta or Hakkaku, but the face that was illuminated was unfamiliar. She tried to keep her disappointment from bubbling to the surface.

"Set them up," she heard him command. "Bottom of the top cave. Get some skins for the girl, too." Then he walked off into the darkness, leaving her stung and upset.

The unfamiliar wolf looked at them and flashed a predatory grin as he sauntered in their direction. He waved a hand at Kagome's belongings. "Get those if you want to keep them," he said lazily. Kagome hastened to shoulder her backpack and her quiver. She kept her bow in her hand; she was horribly uncomfortable suddenly, in the middle of this tribe who didn't seem to know her. The wolf had already walked off, and Sesshoumaru was pacing, measured and even behind him, his shining hair the only thing she could see to follow. Tripping over her own feet she hurried after them.

A second later she felt tiny feet on her collarbone, and Myouga laid a hand against her neck.

"Kagome-sama?" he said, sounding worried.

Kagome didn't answer, merely ducked her head and gritted her teeth, willing herself not to cry as she moved through the dark. Around her she could feel the hot breath of the wolves, and she kept her eyes on Sesshoumaru's feet so she wouldn't look up and see them leering.

It all suddenly seemed so pointless - her hope, her effort, her love. She was in

the company of strangers. She was where she'd wanted to be, but someone had turned off the lights, and the world around her was suddenly sinister, unkind, drawn in dangerous angles that would cut her if she wandered too close.

She had found a wolf named Kouga, but the young man she had known no longer lived inside his skin, and she had been foolish to think that it would have been any other way.

* * *

Someone was shaking her shoulder. Kagome cracked her sleep-bleared eyes to find a wolf peering down at her and grinning toothily. She squeaked in alarm, but he just chuckled.

"Kouga says he wants to see you," he told her in low tones.

Her heart leapt in her chest. "How long have I been asleep?" she asked, disoriented, confused.

In her haori she heard an irritated sigh, and she watched guiltily as Myouga hopped down and into the furs, finally fed up with her. She opened her mouth to apologize to him when to her right, near the moonlight-lined mouth of the cave, she heard a snort. She turned her head to see Sesshoumaru sitting against the wall, eyes closed. "Not long," he said, not bothering to look at her. "I was enjoying the peace."

Kagome had never wished so fervently for a subduing rosary as at that moment as she heard the wolf who had woken her snigger with amusement. She ground her teeth in frustration as she turned to him. "All right," she said.

"Where is he?"

Without a word the wolf rose and strode toward the mouth of the cave, and she scrambled to her feet to follow him. She must have drifted off as soon as she'd laid the furs over herself. Odd, that. She'd been certain she would have stayed awake long enough to cry herself to sleep. At the mouth they passed Sesshoumaru, who made no move, and then they were outside in the crisp night once more, the moonlight gilding the mountains in silver. The wolf turned on the little path and began to climb. With trepidation she followed. She glanced back once over her shoulder, but Sesshoumaru was still as death. He didn't even open his eyes to watch her go. Lips thinning, she shifted her attention to the path ahead.

It wasn't a hard climb and took about twenty minutes, but to her already exhausted body it seemed to be the equivalent of laying down on railroad tracks and waiting for the four-fifteen. And then the four-thirty, just for good measure. Wearily Kagome watched the ground pass by beneath her feet and pitied herself, since it seemed no one else was going to do it. By the time they reached the mouth of another cave, warmly lit with firelight, she was too tired to be apprehensive, and too miserable to speak. She followed her guide inside, eyes seeking Kouga's false, familiar form.

There appeared to be a complete lack of any Kouga-shaped objects in the cave, and Kagome felt a tickle of anxiety as she turned toward her toothy companion. "Where - ?" she began.

He jerked his head toward the back, shrouded in shadows. "Up there," he said.

"You're not going to show me where?" she asked.

The wolf shrugged, crossing his arms and leaning against the wall. "He wants to see you alone," he said mildly, but she still heard the crass suggestion in his voice. "It's not that far."

Kagome was reaching her limit. She didn't even bother to respond, simply stepped around the fire and slowly picked her way into the darkness as beneath her feet the mountain rock gently sloped upwards.

I hope, she thought with feeling, that I don't fall asleep before I get there. She stumbled a little and put her hand out, falling against the stone. Taking a deep, calming breath she continued upward in the winding passage, glad to have the wall to guide her as she walked into blackness.

The tunnel twisted and turned, seeming to curl in on itself, and she almost stopped twice to sink to the floor and wait for someone to find her, but she kept going. It seemed easier than stopping.

And then there was blue light ahead of her. Kagome forced herself to pick up her pace. She turned one more corner, and she was walking up into the night sky.

He was standing at the edge of the cliff, hands on his hips, staring out on his domain. He did not turn when she emerged, so she stopped about two meters behind him, not knowing what to do next. She could see, just over the edge, the smoky fires below dying out as his comrades bedded down for the night. A light breeze lifted the long fall of hair down his back, gently, before setting it down again, against the bare skin of his shoulders and catching just a little on his armor. Kagome wanted to fix it, but her hands would not move. The space and silence stretched out between them, and time left her behind.

I couldn't reach him if I tried, she thought numbly.

As if he had heard her thoughts, she heard a snort. "Well, Kagome?" Kouga demanded, turning his head to stare at her over his shoulder. In the moonlight, his blue eyes glinted. "Finally decided to come back and be my woman, eh?"

Then he grinned.

The world wavered, and Kagome hit her knees, face buried in her hands, the tight lines of loss suddenly snipped with a smile. She felt herself break.

Then his warm, rough hands were on her wrists, but she couldn't see him through her torrent of tears. They felt exactly the way they had so many years ago, when he'd grasped her fingers in his own and declared his devotion, and then she threw her arms around his neck, forehead pressed against the thick line of muscle at his throat, and sobbed.

She'd cried like this only once before, and it hurt just as much this time as it had then. Her lungs jerked painfully inside her body as her tears coursed hot, then cold, over her cheeks, and she cried so hard it wasn't like weeping or sobbing at all, but something almost primal, almost tangible, rubbing ragged edges against her throat, clawing through her chest with talons so sharp her flesh knit back together the moment it had been cut. There was a high, keening noise in her ears, and it took her a moment to realize it was her own voice.

Kouga didn't seem to mind. Through the thick fabric of her haori, she felt his warm, rough hands smoothing soothing circles on her back, as if he were comforting a child. The gesture only made her cry harder, until he gave up and just put his arms around her and waited for her to calm.

After about five minutes Kagome finally pulled away, scrubbing at her face with her sleeve, burning with embarrassment. "Sorry - " she mumbled. "Sorry - "

"Here," he interrupted. "Stop that." He caught her wrists again and forced her hands to her lap before bringing his fingers to her face and gently catching her

tears, lifting them from her skin as if he had to remove them carefully, lest they stain her. "There," he said when he was done. "All better."

Even though nothing was all better, she just nodded.

He smiled again. "I guess you missed me," he remarked sardonically, and because she didn't want to cry any more, she forced herself to laugh.

"Yes," she said, sniffling, speaking around the heartbroken smile on her face. "I missed you."

He nodded, as if he understood, and maybe he did. "I missed you, too," he said. He rose to his feet and held his hands out. When she took them, he helped her up before laying a gentle hand on her back and drawing near. "Come over here. There's a great view."

A foot away from the edge they stopped and he gestured for her to sit, which she did tiredly. Kouga withdrew, keeping his hands to himself in a way that she wouldn't have expected, but then again, maturity did that.

He lowered himself down next to her while she stared into the silvery valley filled with blue shadows, and let the quiet grow around them, like something living, like a wound repairing. She fancied that if she didn't break it, the silence would seal them in, and she could stay there, and not have to think about anything but the night, or feel anything but bittersweet comfort.

After a while, Kouga cleared his throat. "I can't help but notice - " he began.

She didn't have to hear the rest of the sentence to know what he wanted to say. "That I'm still young?" she finished for him, slanting her gaze from the corner of her eye. He turned to her, grinned and nodded.

Kagome sighed. "You remember... you remember our last conversation? In front of the well?"

The sun was just turning the sky grey between the trees, and in her nose the milky smell of things growing curled sweetly, but she wasn't in any position to appreciate it.

"I'm going home," she said, and the struggle to keep her tears hidden away was almost too much to bear.

He didn't seem to be buying it, and that made it worse, because a little part of her didn't want him to. "You should stay with me," he said.

"I can't. I can't. This isn't the right time. I don't belong here."

"What do you mean? You belong here with me."

She looked away, into the depths of the well, before turning back to him. "Please. Just go," she begged. "It's hard enough to leave without you staring after me."

His blue eyes narrowed. "You didn't tell anyone you were going, did you?" he accused.

"Please! I can't say goodbye!"

"Why not?"

She just shook her head, unable to draw her feelings into her mouth and voice them out loud.

He studied her for another moment before taking a step back. "All right," he said. "If this is what you want."

She laughed, so bitterly that it wasn't a laugh at all but a lament, a mourning cry, and then she turned away from him so she wouldn't see him leave. She heard his feet shift on the tender grass, and she wished, treacherously, traitorously, that he would grab her and run. Then he was gone in a gust of wind, and she was alone again.

"Of course I remember it," he said. "That was the last time I saw you. Well, until today, that is," he amended.

She took a shuddering breath. "Well, my home is on the other side of that well."

Kouga looked at her blankly.

She didn't care. "I'm from... well, now I think it's about 400 years in the future... probably more."

"That doesn't explain - " he began.

Kagome shook her head. "I know. But only six years have passed for me," she said. "I don't know why the well chose to let me out here and now, but I guess destiny isn't done with me yet." In her throat, she felt her sadness buzz and bloom into a bitter chuckle.

Kouga turned back and looked at the moon over his valley. "All right," he said at last. "I think I understand."

"Then you're ahead of me," Kagome muttered.

Kouga just shrugged. "Well, I've seen a lot of strange things," he said magnanimously. "Not the least of which is finding you traveling with mutt-face's brother." He let the question hang in the air.

Kagome snorted. "I'm not quite sure how that happened either. One day I was sick and tired and probably in danger of dying, and the next he'd decided I wasn't able to take care of myself."

A puzzled expression crept across his face. "But if you were in danger of dying, then you probably can't - " he began. Kagome shot a glare in his direction.

"I don't need you to rub it in," she said.

Kouga coughed and changed tactics. "He's not... not exactly known for being chari - " he started to say.

"Well," Kagome said, cutting him off, "I did... perform a service for him at one point."

"A service?"

She stuck her nose in the air. "A very valuable service that I cannot discuss with you. And before you ask, no, it wasn't anything perverted, so wipe that smirk off your face."

"What smirk?" Kouga said guiltily, mashing his traitorous muscles into a puzzled expression through a valiant display of willpower. "I'm not smirking."

"Hmph," she said. "I'm sure you're not."

Kouga, sensing dangerous territory, decided to leave well enough alone.

After a few moments Kagome cleared her throat, turning to finally confront the enormous, unspoken thing between them. "You have... a fine son," she said haltingly.

Kouga snorted, and she saw his mouth twist sardonically. "Thank you. That's kinder than he deserves."

"Well, I don't know," she replied diplomatically, "the hime is quite pretty."

Kouga merely raised an eyebrow.

When it was obvious he wasn't going to say anything else, she took a deep breath. "Where... where is..." Her tongue stuttered to a stop. Why is it, she thought, that when I need it the most, my verbal diarrhea turns into verbal constipation? This isn't fair!

Kouga took pity on her. "His mother?" he said kindly.

Kagome nodded, blushing.

He smiled. "She passed away a few years ago."

Kagome felt her heart go numb and cold. "Oh!" she gasped, turning toward him, hands on her mouth, kicking herself inside her head. "I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to..." she trailed off before swallowing hard. "I'm sorry," she said again.

"Mm," Kouga said thoughtfully. "Don't be. She was a good woman, and she died well."

Kagome turned back to the valley. "I wish I could have met her," she said softly.

A little half-smile bloomed on his features. "Kayoko would have liked you," he replied. "And in other circumstances, I'm sure Akiyama would feel the same way."

Kagome squirmed. "I did sort of ruin his plans, didn't I?" she said sadly. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be," he said again. "To tell you the truth I was worried he wouldn't produce any grandchildren. He never showed much, ah, interest."

She giggled. "Well," she reassured him, "you'll have a fine grandson soon."

Kouga grinned, and in the darkness, his teeth were white as stars.

"I'm glad your journey brought you to me," he said, and just like that she was struck with vertigo.

Standing on the edge, Kagome peered dizzily down into the valley between them, where a thousand unsaid words flowed, the river of thoughts that freeze into regret. Maybe and perhaps and I might have and I think and you could have and I should have and if only if only if only if -

In the moment between the heartbeat and the breath Kagome thought, very quietly, that she could have loved him. Perhaps, given enough time. She could have loved him after she patched her broken heart. Maybe. In another life, she could have loved him, and she wondered if he knew that, and if she should tell him.

Then he was hugging her close. He smelled of moss and wild things, and the moment passed. "It's good to talk to you, Kagome," he said. "Thanks for coming up here to see me."

Her chin was on his shoulder, and she the scratchy softness of the fur he wore rubbed over the underside of her jaw. "I didn't know I had a choice," she remarked, watery and amused.

He chuckled, and she felt the rumble against her own skin. "You should go back and go to bed," he told her gently. "You're exhausted."

Kagome sniffled again and drew back. "All right," she said. "I'll see you in the morning then?"

The grin on his face was old and familiar and beautiful. "Do I ever pass up a chance to see you?" he asked.

She gave a sharp, spontaneous, and messy snort. Wiping her nose, Kagome shook her head.

"That's right," Kouga declared. "Now go get some sleep, woman!"

She nodded, not trusting her voice. She rose and walked tiredly back to the opening of the cave, turning only at the entrance to smile at him. "Good night, Kouga-kun," she said.

"Good night, Kagome."

Kagome turned and began the journey back to bed.

Kouga waited for a few moments, just to make sure she was gone, and then stood and crossed his arms.

"You can come out now," he said sharply.

"I do not need you to tell me when I can and cannot do something," Sesshoumaru said from behind him. There was a rustle of silk and the demon lord brushed past, toward the cave.

"Don't trust me, eh?"

"No."

Kouga smirked. "So what are you doing with my Kagome?" he asked.

Sesshoumaru stopped. He appeared to consider the question, then turned and walked back to the cliff edge, where he stared into the valley below.

The wolf prince rolled his eyes in exasperation. So it was going to be one of those conversations. Very well, he knew how to play the game...

He stepped up next to his tenuous ally and stared into the abyss as well. "You going to answer me?"

"It is not any of your business," Sesshoumaru said coldly.

"Sure it is. Kagome is a friend of mine."

"Clearly."

Kouga frowned. "Look, I don't know what you're doing with her, but if she comes to any harm, I swear I'll kill you. And you'd better keep your dirty dog hands to yourself, unless you fancy being minus a set of balls."

"First," Sesshoumaru snapped, annoyed, "as long as she is with me and I have an interest in keeping her alive, she will not be harmed. Second, I will put my hands where I wish."

"You will, will you?"

"I will."

"I don't blame you, of course. She does have beautiful - "

"Not there."

"I'll bet."

Sesshoumaru cracked his knuckles. Kouga smirked.

"I still owe you a death," Sesshoumaru said nonchalantly, as though talking about the weather.

"I know."

"Do not think it will not be your grandson."

The wolf laughed. "Kagome would never let you."

Sesshoumaru glared into the valley and said nothing.

"You know it, too," Kouga said. "And you wouldn't because that would hurt her, and you don't want to see her in pain, right?"

Sesshoumaru sniffed. "She did perform a great service to me," he said haughtily. "It would be uncouth to repay her in torment."

"Whatever," Kouga said. "Just... don't be such an ass, okay? Even Kagome can only take so much."

Sesshoumaru said nothing. After a moment the wolf stretched and yawned, theatrically marking the end of their conversation. "Well," he announced, "I'm off to bed. You're welcome to hang around up here in the cold, but I'd suggest getting back before she finds out you're gone." With that, Kouga turned and

wandered into the cave, leaving Sesshoumaru on the edge of the cliff.

He stared into the valley for another minute before snorting softly. "Keep my hands to myself," he muttered before leaping away.

He arrived back in the nick of time; his clothes barely had time to settle before Kagome rounded the bend and clumped wearily down the rest of the trail.

SShe stepped over his legs on the way back to her bed. "Lazy," she muttered as she passed him. He listened as she crawled under the furs and snuggled down, and within moments she was asleep.
Sesshoumaru allowed himself to relax. He really was tired; he was glad for the chance to rest. Behind his closed eyes, he slipped away.

He was even more grateful for the sleep when he was awoken bright and early the next morning by the hue and cry of many wolves pitching a fit, and found the scowling face of his reluctant host above him.

"Wakey, wakey," Kouga announced. "We have problems."

"Are they my problems?" Sesshoumaru asked, feigning boredom.

"They will be."

Sesshoumaru didn't like the sound of that. "What?"

The wolf heaved an exasperated sigh. "You'd better wake Kagome. My inconstant son has decided he does not like being a man."

It was too early in the morning for this. "What?" he said again.

Very slowly Kouga rubbed a hand across his face. "He's disappeared. Someone else will have to go fetch the medicine."

Foreboding hooked its cold fingers through his throat. "Who?" Sesshoumaru demanded.

In the light of the rising sun, Kouga flashed a predatory grin.

Authorial Non-Sequitur: What Movie 3? I don't remember a third movie! Lalala, not canon!

Tales from the House of the Moon
by
Resmiranda

Chapter Seventeen

" Tomorrow night is nothing but one long sleepless wrestle with yesterday's omissions and regrets."
–William Faulkner

* * *

The skin beneath her eyes was papery and bruised, and her coloring was worrying - almost pasty. He could see her veins branching out in blue tributaries up her throat; just below the surface, her blood thrummed rhythmically, but was not as strong as he would have liked. Against the furs on which she had pillowed her head her long black hair was escaping from its binding, flyaway and feathery and spread lightly around her. She was still sleeping.

Sesshoumaru was feeling rather peeved with himself as he crouched next to her furry bed and tried to decide the best way to wake her, as every moment spent looking at her made him feel just that much more guilty for being forced to bring her into the land of the living again.

Silently, he cursed Akiyama and his roving... eye. If that damnable wolf hadn't decided to hie off for parts unknown, Sesshoumaru would still be asleep and wouldn't be in this annoying predicament. In fact, if he had kept his... hands to himself, neither of them would be here. Sesshoumaru's mouth twisted in annoyance. In the back of his head a small voice was pointing out that he didn't really have to be here anyway, and that it had been his own wanderlust - not to mention his damnable and inconvenient sense of honor - that put him in this position in the first place. Sesshoumaru ignored this, for fear of ruining his foul mood.

He frowned. She had almost always awoken on her own before, so there had never really been the need for him to meddle in her sleeping habits. Even if she slept a little past the time he wanted to be on their way, a sharply cleared throat had always taken care of that. It really was a pity that his failsafe method had failed.

Sesshoumaru stared at her while his toes grew numb from lack of circulation and tried to figure out a way around this problem. He'd thought about nudging her with his foot as he had that first morning they had spent together, but he recalled

that she hadn't been terribly happy about that. Painstakingly following this thread of contemplation to its logical conclusion, he had also decided she would be quite unhappy with a sharp poke in the side, or a pinch on the arm. After all, he quite liked his fingers; they were terribly useful, and if they were purified off it would definitely be an inconvenience until he could grow new ones. In fact, now that he was thinking about it, he wasn't entirely certain that he could grow new ones if they were purified, which was definitely a reason to be cautious. Not for the first time in his life, Sesshoumaru wished that he hadn't delegated most of the more unpleasant tasks, such as waking servants, to Jaken. If only he were here now, Sesshoumaru thought, almost wistfully.

There was something on the edge of his hearing, though, niggling at his consciousness. Gradually Sesshoumaru became aware of the sound of very tiny snores emanating from beneath the top blanket. Gingerly, he slipped a finger beneath the edge of the fur, and scooped Myouga out.

"Gmplntz," Myouga said.

"Wake up," Sesshoumaru demanded. "I need you to suck some blood."

Groggily Myouga rubbed his little hands across his face. "My lord," he whined, "I can't wake up at this hour and in this cold at my time of life. Have you no respect for your elders?"

Sesshoumaru wondered if this was a trick question. "No," he said after a moment, operating on the assumption that any answer he gave an underling was the correct one.

Myouga made a despairing noise.

Sesshoumaru waited. When no further remarks seemed forthcoming he lifted the flea to his face for closer inspection, only to find that Myouga had drifted off again.

"Stop sleeping!" he barked. "I need you to wake Kagome."

"Wake her yourself," the flea mumbled, almost inaudibly.

"How?"

"The same way you wake everyone else up," Myouga snapped.

"Smiting?" he said dubiously. This did not sound like the best advice.

"Never mind. Just shake her shoulder. Now let me sleep! It's cold out here."

Stifling a growl, Sesshoumaru shoved him back beneath the blanket. His companion was still dead to the world.

If only she didn't look so tired, and if only he didn't feel that it was his fault. He had pushed her very hard in the past few days. Briefly, he wished for Aun, though the dragon probably wouldn't be terribly useful in the cold anyway. There was nothing for it, he supposed. He placed a hand on her shoulder and shook it as gingerly as possible, while still as hard as he dared.

She did not seem to take to this.

"Mrr," she said, executing a complicated maneuver that resulted in her entire body - save her face from the nose up - morphing into a completely unrecognizable lump beneath the mound of furs. "Sleeping," she mumbled, the word muffled beneath layers of rank pelts.

Sesshoumaru knew he had not been the most virtuous demon - it really wasn't in the job description, after all - but he was almost positive he hadn't done anything to deserve this. He considered shaking her shoulder again, but there was no telling where it was under all those furs, and besides, he didn't want to accidentally grab something perilous.

He frowned and sighed. "Kagome," he said, gently touching the back of his fingers to her cheek. She felt even more fragile than she looked, parchment skin over porcelain bones, and he drew back, almost afraid he would break her, almost afraid to continue.

She stirred sad memories.

Gritting his teeth he decided he had quite enough of this and angrily squashed his guilt and reservations. Without stopping to think lest he hesitate, he slid a hand beneath the entire mound of furs and threw them off.

"Aaaaeeeeeeeeeeeeeeennnnnngggg!" Kagome cried, shooting straight up and pulling the most piteous face he'd seen in a long time. She hugged her own shoulders, fingers clawing the thick fabric of her haori, eyes still squeezed closed. "Holy god, it's cold!"

This wasn't helping to assuage his guilt. "Wake up," he snapped, standing up and stalking a few feet toward the front of the cave. After a moment he glanced back over his shoulder.

She was blindly groping for the furs by her feet. "There are better ways to wake me up!" she whined. "That was just mean."

"I tried," he informed her. "You were not receptive."

Kagome wanted to cry. She was cold and it was early and she was hungry and he was a jerk and the universe was just not going her way, and hadn't been for the past four weeks and all she wanted was a hot meal, a hot bath, and a foot massage. From a really hot guy. With no shirt on. And pretty hair. Unfortunately nothing seemed to be forthcoming. Even the most accessible of her three needs was out of her reach; she doubted Sesshoumaru had ever given anyone a foot massage in his life, and she severely doubted he would buck the trend just for her.

His hair isn't that great anyway, she lied grouchily to herself. Out loud she said, "What did I ever do to deserve this? Really?" When it became apparent that no one was going to answer her, she scrubbed the sleep from her eyes and blearily looked around to find her blankets several feet away and Sesshoumaru with his back to her, arms folded and feet planted firmly on the ground, looking decidedly grouchy himself. Kagome tried to amend her tone.

"Not to, you know, bother you, but why do I have to be up this early?" she asked. "I thought we were going to just stay here for a few days until Akiyama gets back." She shifted to her knees and reached for a fur to pull around her.

Behind her the demon snorted. "It appears that he will not be returning," he announced. "Blame him."

The edge in his voice scraped across her still fuzzy brain. "What?" she said flatly. His tone woke her up more than the cold ever could. Her searching fingers found

a fur, and she sat back, drawing it over her shoulders as she turned to confront his back and his very-not-pretty-hair, taking a deep breath that did nothing to calm her. "Please tell me you did not just say what I think you said, because if you said what you said I'm going to cry."

After he had worked this out in his head Sesshoumaru felt a little curl of panic at his options. On the one hand, lying would just make her more upset when she found out the truth; on the other, he hated crying. He didn't know how anyone could ever handle a crying female, and the only one he'd ever been able to make any headway with had been Rin.

Rin, he thought, and deep in his mind the sound of her echoed.

And then Sesshoumaru blinked as something in his chest clenched sharply, like a fist crumpling a piece of paper, suddenly ambushed by memory, waylaid by a name. His fingers twitched, and he swallowed hard around the sharp-edged lump that had appeared at the base of his throat.

Wasn't I through with this? he wondered distantly. The question burned across his brain, dark and bright. He closed his eyes and thought to dissipate.

Kagome rubbed her numb fingers together and blew into her hands in what was proving to be a futile attempt to warm them. Idly she wondered if she'd ever be warm again, because she was almost certain the freezing weather had changed the chemical composition of her bones in some way, so that they felt like icicles instead of calcified... whatever they were. She slid an envious glance at Sesshoumaru, who didn't seem to feel the bite, or if he did, he didn't react. Maybe he'd share the secret with her. "Sesshoumaru, do - " she began.

"Do not cry," he said suddenly, cutting her off.

His voice caused something to flip over in her stomach, caused the light of the rising sun to turn heavy and painful, caused the shadows to creep forward. "What?" Kagome asked, inanely, startled, her question flying out of her head. "What?"

For a moment he was silent, and bizarrely she felt as though she were standing on the edge of the sky, about to topple off and tumble forever into the stars.

Then, slowly, he turned and looked at her over his shoulder, and the expression on his face tugged at something deep and shadowy, low in her breast. For a moment, Kagome was back in the firelight with him when he was a wandering king without a kingdom, she a priestess without a shrine, and each shrouded in their own private grief. She suddenly remembered where she was, and whom she was with, and why they were the only ones left behind in the cavernous places of things lost and never found again, the places filled only with the presence of absence.

When they had first met in that warm circle they had been tethered together by the thinnest of shining threads, by the accidents of circumstance. Now that thread was thick and fast, binding them together, made not only of grief but of debt and companionship and words voiced in firelight that they both remembered but never spoke of. With that terrible, dark look in his eyes it was as if he had followed that thread from himself to her, and slipped beneath her skin into the place where sadness lived. Or perhaps it was she who had slipped into him; perhaps they were the same.

Then she blinked, and the shadows skittered away. He turned back to the entrance.

"Do not cry," he repeated. "I dislike tears."

Kagome thought of Inuyasha, who hated tears as well, and nodded. "S - sorry," she said. "It was just a joke."

He was silent for a moment before she heard him laugh low and sharp. "In any case," he said, "I would not blame you. The frustration of the situation is enough to make anyone cry."

They were back to light words now, and she wondered if they would ever speak heavily again. Biting her lip, Kagome physically shook herself before replying. "Even you?" she asked, aiming for coy and succeeding passably well.

"No."

"You said anyone," she pointed out as she struggled to stand and began to stomp life into her feet.

"Miko, I am not just anyone," he reminded her.

"Right, I forgot for a moment," she replied, grinning as she stepped up next to him. "You're Sesshoumaru-sama."

"And you'd do well to remember that, miko-sama."

She sniffled as they walked to the front of the cave and stared down at the hubbub beneath them, leaving the sharp darkness behind. "I'll try. Now, what are we doing today?"

Next to her, Sesshoumaru sighed. "No doubt we will find out soon enough," he said, unfurling a long clawed finger to point at the main campfire, where most of the wolves were milling around. "Our host has asked that we attend."

Kagome felt her stomach sink. "This will not end well, will it?" she asked.

Sesshoumaru looked down the mountainside and into a future that was becoming more and more complicated with each passing day. "That I doubt," he answered.

"I thought so."

* * *

By the fire, Kagome huddled in furs while Myouga huddled in her clothes and translated the barks and growls for her, as the whole tribe - the real wolves as well as the youkai - seemed to have gathered around, and the guttural, animal vocalizations were the common tongue for everyone but her. She felt very in the dark, and Sesshoumaru sat next to her and glowered unhelpfully at the flames in front of him, either listening intently to the conversation around them or ignoring it completely. It was difficult to tell with him. Kagome concentrated on her sleepy translator.

"They are still arguing over who will go and bring the prince back," Myouga yawned. "It seems no one wants to leave the mountain in wintertime and go alone."

"Why not?"

"Wolves hunt in packs - they aren't solitary animals. It's almost impossible for one of them to bring down the prey they need to stay alive," Myouga supplied.

Kagome considered this. "So... why can't a large group of them go?"

Myouga shrugged. "Probably because they like it here and don't want to travel. And the mountains are more dangerous in the winter as well."

"They are?" Kagome asked. She supposed it made sense, but she had passed across them safely enough. "I did all right."

Next to her, Sesshoumaru grunted.

"Er," the flea said. "There are many more youkai, as well as wild animals, in the mountains during the winter, and most half-mad with hunger. The wolves like to fight, but not that much. It is not a matter of passage, but of prowess."

"Prowess?"

"Battle," Myouga supplied. "You were well-protected."

Sesshoumaru grunted again as if to dismiss the notion that he was protecting her, despite the fact that her protection was supposedly the whole reason he was putting himself through such hassle. Kagome wondered if he would ever discharge his debt, or if he would hang around her forever, and to her ambivalent surprise she couldn't decide which of these options she preferred. She sighed. This is what I get for being so friendly: emotionally attached. Great.

She clenched her jaw. It wasn't that she hadn't been somewhat attached before, but it had been an abstract attachment to memory, to the idea of Sesshoumaru, rather than any real attachment to him as a person. Youkai. Whatever. The point was that the idea was a thing relegated to times past, whereas long, heated discussions and quiet, shared grief were very real and suddenly very visceral. He was, if not a friend, then a cared-for comrade. She wished him well in a way that was very immediate, instead of a concern broadly covered by her general tender nature. Kagome wasn't certain she liked this development.

And in a way that was sad as well - she remembered that there was a time when she opened her heart to anyone, but somehow the door had become more and more difficult to fling wide, sealed by scars and blocked with memories. Yet he had his foot wedged in it, so to speak, and had been able to lever it open. She wondered how far he had walked inside, and if it was too late to turn him back. Too late meant that even if she could, she would not want to.

Kagome shook herself - thinking of that at this juncture would probably only lead to angst, and that would not be productive. She gazed moodily into the flames as the wolves barked and snarled and growled and whined around her, arguing amongst themselves.

Oblivious to his companion's musings, Sesshoumaru heaved an inward sigh. It was bad enough that he had to deal with his own tedious matters of rule; that he was now forced - out of politeness and acknowledgment of treaty - to listen to someone else's tedious affairs seemed distinctly unjust. That his companion would probably be asked to participate in said affairs seemed even more so, since this meant that, by proxy, he would be asked to meddle as well. Sesshoumaru generally liked to keep himself out of such things in deference to both fairness to all allies and his own distaste of unnecessary effort. It wasn't that he was lazy, per se; he wasn't. He was just efficient with his energy, and it had carried him far.

Whereas Kagome spent energy every which way. They were always stopping in a

village - even if she didn't need shelter for the night - and doing this or that small task for the inhabitants, or, in the case of that stupid boar, extremely large tasks for which she never asked payment except in the most meager of terms. What was even worse was that he suspected she would be carrying on exactly the same way if he weren't there, which would be dangerous and unnecessary and practically guaranteed that he couldn't leave her alone for more than five minutes before she was getting herself neck-deep in other people's problems. She was the most tiring thing since... ever. He wondered how his idiot half-brother had handled it.

A commotion pulled him out of his moody reverie. Behind Kouga a wolf and youkai snarled and then leapt for each other's throat, clearly in disagreement over something that no doubt wouldn't be worth the bloody effort. He saw Kouga roll his eyes wearily before wading in and pulling them apart, holding the wolf by the scruff of his neck, and his underling by his greasy hair. Sesshoumaru wrinkled his nose, discreetly as possible, in mild distaste.

At the very least, he thought, he could have presentable henchmen. He sniffed. It probably came from hanging around in dark caves all the time. When you couldn't see anyone else, it didn't matter what they looked like. Standards were bound to be lax. Feeling almost smug, Sesshoumaru picked an imaginary piece of detritus from the sleeve of his kimono and released it to the wind.

Kagome watched Kouga with distinct admiration. He looked so grown-up - and she had to keep reminding herself that he looked grown-up because he was, in fact, grown-up - so commanding and secure in his role. She felt proud of him, even though she had nothing to do with his force of presence or strength of leadership. Perhaps she just felt proud to know him; privileged to be the friend of such a good person. Who wouldn't, after all? Kagome was aware that she was mooning ever so slightly, but she decided that it didn't really matter - no one cared, and there was no harm in admiring a friend.

From the corner of his eye, Sesshoumaru watched her watch the wolf break up

the fight, and felt rather peeved. If she was aroused by displays of force, he could do it much better than that, and had demonstrated as such many times in front of her; there was no cause for her to become flustered over inferior strength.

Not, he thought, that I care what she thinks, but honestly. It's as though she prefers straw to silk. No taste at all.

Unconsciously, he stuffed his hands inside the sleeves of his kimono with rather more petulant force than was strictly necessary.

Kagome watched as Kouga snarled at both of them, saying something unintelligible in the language of yips and growls.

"He says that he's going to decide once and for all who will go fetch his son," Myouga translated. "He says he's sick of the fighting."

Kouga threw each of them in opposite directions - quite impressive, she thought, smiling - before walking back to the fire, folding his legs beneath him, and sitting down. With great gravity, he lifted his arms in the air, palms out, and waited for the hubbub around him to die down.

After a gradually less and less cluttered minute, the camp was silent enough for him to speak. Kagome watched as he opened his mouth and howled a series of sliding tones that made her shiver a little bit. It always seemed just a little bit wild, a little more untamed, to hear inhuman voices come from human throats. Well, human-looking throats, anyway. She waited for the translation.

"Oh," said Myouga from beneath her collar. "That's... surprising."

Kagome frowned, suddenly apprehensive. "What is?" she whispered.

"Well, he says... he says that he'll go fetch Akiyama himself, and he'll take a few reliable comrades with him," Myouga told her.

"Why is that surprising?" she asked, puzzled.

She felt him give a very tiny shrug before he answered her. "Because he's the tribe leader, and it's not common for the leader to leave his post, especially during the winter. The tribe will be under his second-in-command, and that usually leads to unrest. Wolves fight among themselves all the time for ranking, so without a strong hand in charge things can get pretty chaotic. Still, it's better to stay here than go out into the mountains, so I don't think anyone will be complaining much. Kouga-sama is a strong headsman, and courageous to go through the mountains in winter, so no one will want to be on his bad side when he gets back."

Kagome just nodded in response. Not for the first time, she wished that she had studied more under Kaede - or any other miko, frankly - as her knowledge of youkai was still sorely lacking. Miroku had always been the one who knew that sort of thing. She frowned until Kouga caught her attention by suddenly speaking in the human tongue.

"Now," he announced, "we must choose a party to go northward and fetch the necessary medicine."

There was a discontented stirring, and Kagome could only imagine the consternation the rest of the tribe would feel over going further north into the mountains.

"We must choose our strongest and most experienced envoys to negotiate the difficult passage - " here Kagome heard Sesshoumaru laugh one of his low, humorless laughs, as though he was just now seeing a joke that wasn't funny at all " - the envoys we most trust."

He lowered his hands, and to her rather unsurprised dismay gestured towards Sesshoumaru and her. "Sesshoumaru-sama, Kagome-sama," he said, and the appended honorific on her name startled her a little bit, "I would like to ask you to make the journey."

Kagome bit her lip. She'd suspected something like this would come up, and she wanted to help. She had thought about Machiko in tiny little thoughts over the past few days, thinking of how horrible it would be to die alone and take her own child with her, and the idea had tugged her heart enough that the mission she had undertaken had assumed a little more weight than that of duty. On the other hand, she wasn't strong, and had no idea how to go about procuring the medicine needed.

Sesshoumaru watched as Kagome stood and bowed her head, and groaned inwardly. She was going to accept the charge and they were going to have to go north and he didn't want to -

"I am very sorry, Kouga-k - sama," she stumbled over his honorific, clearly unused to it. "But we cannot accept this mission. I am neither strong, nor experienced, and after all, I am only in Sesshoumaru-sama's charge."

Sesshoumaru pressed a claw into the palm of his hand in order to keep his eyebrows from shooting up in surprise.

"And as it is not his duty to attend to my obligations," she continued, "we cannot do this." She bowed again before lowering herself to the ground. Sesshoumaru

found himself grudgingly impressed, and shifted his eyes back to their host.

Kouga was smiling indulgently, as though he had already anticipated this eventuality. Sesshoumaru found that worrying.

"Kagome-sama," he began warmly, "you are much stronger than you perceive yourself to be - " to Sesshoumaru's increasing irritation Kagome blushed prettily at this assurance " - so there is no reason for you to decline this mission. I trust you. You are both strong. And after all..."

Kouga shifted his gaze to Sesshoumaru, and the youkai lord suddenly felt a cold dread seize his stomach. He wouldn't DARE mention that, in front of everyone...

No, he wouldn't. He was bluffing, hoping that Sesshoumaru would panic and cave into his wishes. Sesshoumaru's eyebrows drew down into a thunderous glare. He wouldn't dare, and I will not be manipulated, he thought.

He lifted his chin arrogantly to let Kouga know he was not to be trifled with.

His heart dropped through his stomach when Kouga gave him a small, apologetic smile, and opened his mouth to continue. "After all," Kouga repeated, shifting his eyes to Kagome, "Sesshoumaru-sama knows the challenges and will rise to meet them, as he is, in fact, experienced in gathering this sort of medicine."

Sesshoumaru couldn't bite back the snarl that clawed through his throat, and he heard faint snickering in the surrounding throng.

Kagome felt slightly faint, and extremely befuddled, and not slightly disturbed by the cruel sound that had escaped her companion. She didn't dare look at him.

What... the... hell... she thought, very, very deliberately. She repeated the phrase in her head, as if keeping her mind occupied with it was the only way she would be able to avoid contemplating the meaning of Kouga's words.

For his part, Kouga continued as if he had not just cavalierly impugned Sesshoumaru's honor. "And of course," he said loudly, "Sesshoumaru-sama is a valued ally. I could not ask anyone else to go, for I trust no one else as much as my fellow lord." And he bowed low toward them, a small, triumphant smile on his face.

Sesshoumaru growled. Trapped. Kouga had just stripped away all his honorable exits - he was, in spite of himself, the ideal candidate, and he had just been handed the deepest trust of the tribe. He couldn't refuse without losing face or damaging the alliance between them. And the reason? It was just that much more insurance against claiming the baby's life in payment for Rin's - a death to pay for her first death, and letting it stay dead to pay for her second, when the wolf tribe didn't lift a finger against the usurpers despite alliances to his House. He could understand why they did not, but it was still a matter of honor, and a personal matter as well. And now he couldn't kill the child, even if he could get around Kagome.

And I can't kill that revolting, bastard wolf, he thought furiously.

Kouga coughed. "Of course, if you wish for Kagome-sama to stay with me, I could keep her sa - "

Sesshoumaru snarled again before shutting his mouth in order to grind his teeth together and contemplate soothing thoughts of butchery.

As if she were dreaming, Kagome watched Kouga straighten and smile at her with wickedly pointed teeth. "Thank you," he said, "for accepting this mission. We will have your provisions ready by noon."

"But I - " she began.

Next to her, Sesshoumaru shot to his feet, turned smartly, and stalked off through the pack who parted before him like a snickering Red Sea.

"Um..." she trailed off, lost, confused, and beginning to get angry. Around her there seemed to be a general consensus that the meeting was over, and the crowd was rapidly dispersing, leaving her alone by the fire and staring at Kouga, who appeared to be avoiding her gaze.

"Myouga?" she muttered. "What was that all about?"

There was no answer, and when she checked beneath her collar she found that he had disappeared, just like he always used to do when the going got tough.

It seemed to her that the universe was taking unfair advantage of her normally genial nature. Very steadily Kagome gathered her furs around herself, stood, and then stomped her foot and tried not to scream in frustration. She closed her eyes and tried to think.

I'm going to kick someone. Probably Kouga. In the shins - no, in the family jewels, so that he will never again bedevil the world with his annoying progeny. I'm going to venture out into the mountains that I now know are full of hunger-crazed youkai and ravenous animals, and head north where it's cold, and what the HELL did he mean by experience? Kagome took a deep breath. I've been vaulted into a parallel universe, and I didn't even notice.

"Kagome?"

Kagome opened her eyes and glared murderously at Kouga, who had the decency to look abashed before giving her a sheepish grin.

"I - " he began.

"What," she cut him off, "the hell was that all about?"

"Er - "

"You just volunteered me to go get killed when I said I couldn't do it!"

"You see - "

"And you insulted Sesshoumaru! What the hell?" She stopped and took another deep breath, well aware that she was tired and cranky and not prepared for this.

"Kagome!" Kouga managed. "I'm sorry. I had to."

Kagome gave him a look. "Had to," she said. "Really."

"Yes, really."

"You want to tell me why?"

He looked down at the ground, which Kagome did not take to be a good sign.

"Well?" she demanded after a moment.

The wolf took a deep breath and raised his eyes, rueful expression on his face. "Forgive me, Kagome. I had to say those things and... well, I had to force Sesshoumaru's hand."

"Why, and how did you just do that?"

He sighed. "I effectively gave him the trust of the tribe to discharge this duty. He cannot refuse, deliberately fail, or otherwise harm my future grandson without breaking our alliance now."

Kagome shut her eyes very tightly until she saw stars, then opened them again. "Do I want to know why he would do that?"

"Payment."

"For what?"

His mouth twisted. "I'd rather not say," he said defensively.

He doesn't want me to think less of him, she thought miserably. "You know what? I don't want to know," she said quickly. "If he has to kill a baby to make you pay

for something, I don't want to know what that payment is for, because you must have done something terrible."

Kouga rubbed his neck, looking faintly ashamed. "Well, he's free to kill him later. I'm just buying him time. With luck, Sesshoumaru won't be bothered to try and extract payment for another fifty years. By that time the kid'll have a fighting chance."

Kagome felt slightly betrayed, and very alone again, lost in affairs that she didn't understand. "Okay. All right. Now, would you like to tell me why Sesshoumaru is so, um, experienced?" For some reason she felt nauseous.

Kouga rocked back on his heels and looked up at the sky. "I don't think," he said slowly, "that it is my place to tell you that."

"Why not?" she almost yelled.

"That's Sesshoumaru's business," he hastened to placate her. "It's his to tell."

"And you just told everyone of it."

"I had to. I'm sorry."

And he really did look sorry. In fact, he looked almost miserable. "I'm sorry I had to drag you into this," he continued, "but Sesshoumaru will not allow you to stay behind with me or the tribe."

Doesn't trust you, I'll bet. Kagome clenched her teeth. "Right," she replied bitterly.

"No problem."

He winced. "But on the upside, you probably won't come to any harm," he said, brightly brittle.

"Probably," she muttered. She turned to stare at the flames in front of her, wondering why she felt as if Sesshoumaru had lied to her. It wasn't as if he was obligated to tell her everything about himself, or anything, even. He had a right to his secrets, even when they were as large as this one seemed to be.

Ass, she thought.

Next to her, Kouga cleared his throat.

"All right," she cut off whatever he had been about to say. "I'm going to go get my things, and I'll take your stupid provisions. But when I get back from getting this medicine, I'm going to kick you. Where it hurts."

The wolf gave a resigned sigh. "Fair enough."

* * *

It turned out that the wolves were big fans of dried meat. And dried meat. With a side of dried meat. Kagome wished for a salad, but at least it was better than dry noodles day in and day out, and she was almost certain that she'd lost ten pounds on the journey here - it probably wouldn't hurt to gain some of that back.

At least she was warmer, now. The heavy fur cape they'd given her kept the wind out, and a few discarded soft boots - lined with fur - now swaddled her feet, so the bite of winter was reduced somewhat. On the other hand, it was getting colder and colder, and they'd only traveled for a day.

They hadn't spoken more than ten words to each other, either. Sesshoumaru was still fuming, and she had let him stew; she wasn't entirely sure that she trusted him to not rip her heart out if she broached a touchy subject anyway, so she'd kept her head down and tried to ignore the roiling in her stomach that only seemed to get worse the tighter she locked her words away. She wished Myouga hadn't run away - she really could have used someone to talk to, or to make peace between the two of them. As it was, the day passed slowly, and she watched the ground pass by beneath her feet as the silence between them grew louder than speaking ever could.

Now her feet felt as though they were about to snap off. The sun was going down, and it had begun to snow, though instead of the flurries she had seen in the lowlands it now stung her cheeks as the wind whipped over her face. She found it difficult to keep her eyes open, so she squinted down at the ground and kept her eyes on Sesshoumaru's tracks in the fading light.

When I get home, she thought, I'm going to invest in one of those little scooters, so I never have to walk anywhere again. And it will have a seat warmer, even if I have to set fire to it to make it warm.

"Here," came his voice from in front of her. The word was so abrupt and unexpected that Kagome's head snapped up and she pinched a nerve in her neck.

"Ooooh," she hissed, massaging it. She glanced at her companion, only to find that he wasn't there.

"Sesshoumaru?" she called, voice almost lost in the wind, and she felt the sudden edge of panic.

To her infinite relief, his head appeared from behind a sharply turned rock. "There's a cave here," he said blandly. "If you do not want to die, I suggest getting inside."

In the privacy of her head, Kagome gave a shriek of frustration before stumbling forward and around the corner, where she almost collided with him.

"What - ?" she began before lowering her eyes to the narrow, waist-high crack at his feet. "Oh no," she groaned.

"Quiet," he snapped. "It is not as small as it looks. Now get in, or I will go first and you can stay out here."

Biting her lip, Kagome unshouldered her backpack before crouching down. She squeezed through, squirming her way inside.

It was roomier inside, but not by much. There wasn't room to stand up, but it was deeper than she thought it would be. Grunting, she pulled her backpack through the narrow opening and moved to the back, sliding down the wall to sit with her knees drawn up to her chin. She set her backpack down on the top of her feet. There wasn't much space for anything else, and Kagome wondered with increasing dismay how she was going to sleep as she watched Sesshoumaru perform a series of impressive acrobatics in order to fit through the entrance before sliding down the opposite wall himself. His armor scraped against the rock until he came to a stop, left knee - the side closest to the crack in the mountainside - folded up, left hand propped against it, effectively shielding most of the little cave from the opening.

The cave was so small that he was almost touching her; there couldn't have been more than a foot between them. Kagome bit her lip miserably and stared at her knees in the uncomfortable silence.

Sesshoumaru heard her swallow hard before she opened her mouth to speak. "Thank you," she said, voice small and flat in the close confines of the cave. Outside in the night, the icy wind howled through the mountains.

"For what?" he asked. He felt tired, almost weary, and he couldn't put his finger on why. Perhaps today had just been too draining, and he certainly hadn't had enough sleep the night before. Perhaps the cold was beginning to get to him.

She shifted. "For... sitting near the entrance," she finished.

He grunted in response. In a little while the cave would be warm from their combined body heat, and he could stand to have one side colder than the other if it meant he was able to sleep out of the way of the elements.

She was silent for a while before she rustled a bit. He heard a small whining noise and then something entered his field of vision. He looked down.

It was a blanket of fur, obviously one of the ones she had slept on in the wolf camp. He glanced at her, raising a brow quizzically.

Kagome blushed. "In case you get cold," she squeaked. She watched as he shifted his eyes back to the blanket, as though contemplating the idea, before lifting it from her hand, shaking it out, and draping it against his left side.

"Thank you," she heard him mutter. She just nodded before reaching into her backpack again and withdrawing her squashed sleeping bag. She could sit against the fur cloak and drape the sleeping back over herself, she reasoned. That way she would be warm enough to catch a few hours of slumber, even if she was forced to sleep in a sitting position. Kagome arranged it over her knees and pulled it up to her shoulders before letting her head fall back against the wall and closing her eyes.

The wind moaned against the mountain, but it slowly began to warm inside their little haven. After about fifteen minutes or so Kagome cracked an eye to study Sesshoumaru. He had rested his head against the wall and was gazing over his arm to the world outside, but instead of looking bored or blank, she thought he looked almost resigned. There was a certain slant of the brow, a certain sad lowering of his eyelids, as though he was looking forward to the future, and it held toil without reward. Or maybe he was bored. The light was almost gone, and it was difficult to discern his expression. She was probably just projecting her own weary resignation onto him.

She thought it had been very unfair of Kouga to trap him like this.

Kagome shifted in her seat, wiggling down against the soft-skin underside of the cloak, and tried to decide which of her questions she wanted to ask him first before deciding to start small and then work upwards.

"Sesshoumaru?" she said.

He didn't answer, merely slid his eyes away from the cave entrance to her face, a move calculated, no doubt, to discourage unpleasant questions.

Well, she thought, he knows it's coming. She cleared her throat. "Um," she began,

then stopped.

"Yes?" he prompted after a moment. Kagome swallowed.

"Where - where do you think Myouga went?" There. That's not offensive or prying, she thought. Baby-steps.

Sesshoumaru snorted. "He's getting fat off the wolves," he said. "Which is just as well. He would probably die in this."

Her heart dropped - there was no chance he would join them, then, and she felt his absence keenly. "He would?" she asked, hoping against hope that this was not the case. She wasn't entirely certain she wanted to remain with Sesshoumaru alone.

"He was already useless," Sesshoumaru said blandly. "He would have frozen completely, even in your clothes."

Kagome bit her lip and felt a tweak of tears high in her nose, but it didn't progress any further, for which she was grateful.

She sighed, lining up her words again. "I was also wondering..." - Sesshoumaru's eyebrows drew down slightly, in a suspicious frown - "Um... wondering what... we'll have to do. To find the herbs we need," she finished lamely, the real question she wanted to ask still leaden beneath her tongue.

Across from her, Sesshoumaru let a small sigh escape between his lips. "Arduous journey, trial by fire, tedious negotiation," he said tersely. "At least, that's the way these things usually seem to work."

Kagome was not at all certain she liked the sound of this. Arduous journey was already covered, and tedious negotiation didn't sound so bad, but trial by fire made her stomach flip and turn, and in her hands the blood seemed to retreat, leaving her fingers cold and numb. She took a shuddering breath.

"Do not worry," Sesshoumaru said suddenly, and she looked up, but now it was so dark she couldn't see his features any longer, only his dim outline. She swallowed hard.

Now that she couldn't see his face, it suddenly seemed easier, though that was like saying the ground was softer than rock.

She shifted her gaze back to where she knew her own knees were, and gathered her courage.

"Sesshoumaru."

There was a pause, and then she heard him shift against the wall. "Yes?" he said quietly.

Kagome closed her eyes, and stepped off the precipice and into uncharted territory.

"What did Kouga mean when he said you had experience?" she asked, and she felt vaguely proud that her voice shook only a little.

Silence. Then, "He didn't tell you himself?"

Mutely, she shook her head before realizing that he might not be able to see her. "No," she said, voice cracking only a little. "He said it was your business to tell if you wanted."

Sesshoumaru was silent. In her chest her heart beat heavily, and she licked her lips and hoped for something that she couldn't even put a name to. In the dark warmth of the cave she waited for him to answer, and listened to the wild wind in the valley below.

He knew she would ask. She would be... well, very not her to let it slide, and really, it had been so long ago, and her heart was so tender that it didn't seem to matter to tell her. The way he had contributed to the weakness of his house wouldn't matter to her the way it mattered to other youkai. She was human.

In the secret spaces of his head, a small voice whispered that she would even like him more for it.

The tension was horrible, and twice she opened her mouth to take it back, but twice no sound came out, so she waited in agony, wondering if he was going to injure her in a rage, or never speak to her again, or something, and then he shifted against the wall and spoke.

"I have done this before," he said, and his voice was so low she had to strain to hear it over the howling of the wind, "but the child in question was not my own."

She let out the breath she had been holding and felt something unclench in her chest. She was oddly relieved, as though she had been granted a reprieve. After a moment Kagome licked her lips, suddenly very, very curious.

"Whose was it?" she asked, and she was surprised to find her voice shaking along with her hands, and dimly she realized she was filled with adrenaline. She clenched her fists and strained to hear his voice.

For a long moment, he didn't answer, and then she heard him sigh in the darkness, and she felt the sound curl across her heart.

"It was my father's," he said, words grey and heavy, empty and tumbling down, over and over, into the space between them, and the implication made her breath catch in her throat.

"I made the journey for Inuyasha and his mother."

Tales from the House of the Moon
by
Resmiranda

Chapter Eighteen

"Among the attributes of God, although they are all equal, mercy shines with even more brilliancy than justice."
- Miguel de Cervantes

. . .

One day when he was still young, when he had the appearance of a ten-year-old

boy, when he was treading water between that strange, dim-remembered time of childhood and that agonizing year when he grew so quickly he became crippled inside his skin, Sesshoumaru sat in the gardens beneath his mother's favorite mimosa tree and watched the servants' children playing.

Three girls - they looked seven or so by human standards - and two little boys, much younger, ran about the courtyard, skipping lightly over his mother's wild, overgrown flower beds, hiding from each other behind neglected trees damp with moss and heavy with unpruned foliage, laughing and shouting. Their exuberant babble drifted to his ears, and he found it soothing after the training his father had given him that morning.

A flock of birds, the flat thunder of wings, a few flashing white throats, and all feathers so black they caught the sun in glossy rainbows. Next to him his father gave a shout - his sign to begin - and in his hands the muscles jerked in anticipation as he launched himself into the air.

"Just the white ones!" his father called from below, sounding jovial. Sesshoumaru clenched his teeth and flexed his claws, and then he was in the middle of it, bright eyes and sharp beaks and each white throat he found he skewered on a claw, running straight through and out the other side. First there was the small resistance, the bubble before the skin burst, and then there was the swift cracking of tiny bones - and he could always feel the smooth feathers on his fingers, the feathers around the wound that slid so kindly, so traitorously across his hands - and then the blood. And always, always, the screaming; always the call of dying things scraping down the inside of his skull with a serrated edge.

He wished he could kill each and every one of them, just to make them stop.

He took down twenty-three in all, and the smell of blood was at once tantalizing and unremarkable. When he again touched the earth his father strolled over, lord of the world, and inspected the corpses that littered the ground.

"Not bad, not bad," he said finally. Sesshoumaru felt a faint smile threaten to break out on his normally solemn face, but his father was not finished yet. "Still, not good, either," he continued. "There were thirty-five."

Thirty-five! He had been so certain he had mastered this exercise. Disappointment crashed over him, heavy enough he physically wavered, and Sesshoumaru clenched his fists so hard in frustration that he broke his own skin. Fortunately his father had already taught him the tricks of keeping a face free of reaction, never showing weakness or pain, so he kept his claws embedded in his flesh to prevent his blood from spilling; he knew his father would smell it.

Sesshoumaru executed a curt bow and his father dismissed him. As he always did after training, he walked, calm and collected, from the dojo, or the expanse of grass behind it. He passed over the courtyard, down and across the little bridge - the one arching over the stream that ran through the estate - and into the garden at the back of the house, where he folded himself into the shade of the tree and closed his eyes. Always he breathed deeply, licked away what blood was still on his hands, and let his abused ears seek sounds that didn't scream.

It was a fresh, mid-spring day, and the smell of green growing plants on the breeze curled over the imaginary wounds on the inside of his head and lifted away the irritation. Schooling his face into a blank mask he slowly unclenched his hands to let the holes bleed and close without anyone else knowing. He watched as he healed, trying to regard the stinging sensation as merely a curiosity, but to his chagrin he discovered that he still didn't have complete control yet. His breath hissed through his teeth ever so slightly, and silently he cursed himself again. Any opponent formidable enough to inflict a wound would be powerful enough to hear his sibilant reaction, and would have the means to press his advantage home. That simply would not do.

Sesshoumaru stared at the grass and concentrated on his breathing - slow, even, regular, no pain or surprise, no hate or joy - and then pushed his claws into his palms again, again breaking the skin and drawing blood. This time, however, he kept his face - not still, because still implied control, and control meant that too much thought was going into it - but bland, full of affected boredom. It still stung, but this time he had no physical reaction when he uncurled his fingers once more and let himself heal.

He repeated this exercise two more times before he was satisfied that he had, for today at least, rid himself of adverse reaction. Leaning back against the rough bark of the tree, he brought his hand to his face and slowly licked the blood away

from the right hand, and then the left. When he was satisfied that all traces of his ignominious reaction to moderate failure were erased from his skin, Sesshoumaru allowed his hands to drop into his lap as he closed his eyes and tried to think of nothing at all.

In the garden and in his head, Sesshoumaru let the leaves rustle, felt the light move over the land, and waited to hear the flap of butterfly wings against the sky.

He might have dozed off, or achieved his objective of complete void, but something at the edge of his consciousness shouted. A little voice, high and sharp, made its existence felt.

Sesshoumaru opened his eyes, and let them roam where they would, seeking the disturbance of his peace. It did not take long for him to pinpoint the source of his problems.

Down in the courtyard there was a small commotion among the children he had been gazing at only moments before, and Sesshoumaru lifted his head to see the children fighting over something. He could not discern, in the babble of high-pitched voices, what the argument was about, but it didn't really matter. Children quarreled quickly, and just as quickly decided the victor; in five minutes time, one way or another, the argument would be resolved and the garden would be restored to its former tranquility. The effort required to break up the fight was more than he wished to expend, so he sat back and watched the little drama unfold.

The girls, older and bigger, were trying to persuade the smaller boys to do something, though they were having none of it. The argument grew louder and louder until one of the girls - the tallest one, with bright orange hair braided down her back - stepped forward. Sesshoumaru shifted, interested to see what she was planning to do.

When she drew back and punched the smallest boy across the mouth Sesshoumaru frowned. That didn't seem terribly fair, but then again fights rarely were. Not to mention it seemed just a little out of kilter to witness a female standing up to a male and knocking him down, no matter how much smaller he was than she. Briefly he considered putting a stop to the scuffle, but his father

had taught him a very painful lesson when he was younger about violence against females who were not attacking him, and at any rate the boy needed to stand up for himself. There wouldn't always be arbiters in the shadows to save him from crazy females with a fight in their eyes.

The boy went sprawling against the pavement, a pained cry escaping his mouth. The girl who had hit him looked horrified, but then the boy's companion ran into her full force, knocking her against a tree. She screeched and shoved him away, which was a miscalculation on her part as the boy took a large fistful of her hair with him. She shrieked again and lashed out with a foot, catching him in the leg and knocking him to the ground as the first boy stood and launched himself at one of the other girls. Sesshoumaru smelled blood, and his frown melted into a scowl. The situation had possibly deteriorated to the point of intervention, even though he wasn't in the mood to break up a fight that he had no part in.

He was still debating whether or not to pull the children apart when someone made the decision for him.

Sesshoumaru's eyes widened as a shoji screen slid open to reveal his mother. She paused, took in the scene before her, and then strode down the steps and into the garden, a whirlwind of silver hair and indigo kimonos and just as wild as ever.

"Takara-sama!" The exclamation drew his attention away from the woman sweeping into the fray to the source of the voice. Behind her, he saw a bevy of court ladies and maids-in-waiting clustered around the screen frame and peering out as their mistress jumped into the task in front of her, as she did with every task. He turned back and watched his mother in action.

With the practiced fingers of a woman who had been the eldest of ten children, his mother stepped neatly into the scuffle and separated the combatants, expertly avoiding whirling limbs and crooked fingers tipped with tiny claws, picking each of them up and separating them with ease. The activity level died almost immediately upon her interference; recognizing her, the fighters stared up with wide eyes and open mouths, and, in one instance, a very bloody nose.

His mother brushed off their scrutiny the way she brushed off almost everything that neither pleased nor displeased her, ignoring their gawking faces as she

squinted down at each one, assessing the damage they had sustained. When she was done, she straightened to her full height and beckoned to the maids clustered in the doorway.

Sesshoumaru had always admired the way his mother bent the world around herself, as though she were an actress on a stage. Despite her lack of beauty, she still projected a glamour that overrode the freckles and the wide mouth and small eyes, and she drew everything into herself. The phenomenon he was witnessing now he had seen many times: as though the maids suddenly found themselves actors instead of spectators, they physically shook themselves - this always involved rapid blinking for some reason - and bustled out onto the stage, suddenly eager to take part in the magnificent play they had awoken to find themselves in. They took the children away, clucking and scolding, and he saw his mother hide a smile behind her long sleeve, as though enjoying a private joke.

Within the minute the garden was cleared, and she ascended the steps again. However, instead of returning inside his mother shooed everyone else back into the house before sliding the screen closed again and turning to look straight at her son.

Sesshoumaru had thought she was ignorant of his presence. He quirked an eyebrow, puzzled, and didn't move as she strode toward him with a determined look on her face, which was so different from her normal grin that he was too confused to react when she stopped in front of him and smacked him smartly across the face.

He didn't betray any pain, just looked at her, perplexed. She made a frustrated noise and threw her hands in the air. "I hate it when you do that," she informed him.

He still did not understand. "Do what?" he wanted to know.

She shook her head. "When you don't react." Without ceremony, she sat swiftly on the ground in what was probably a controlled fall, but looked like a sudden collapse. She slumped in front of him and stared off to his right in that peculiar way she had whenever something had upset her.

"But that's what I'm training to do," he said, even more confused, and now worried that she was angry with him.

She sighed. "I know," she told him. "It just makes you look so much older."

He sniffed. "I am older," he told her, then paused. "And that did hurt," he added resentfully. "What was that for?"

"Hmm?" she looked up, the curls and loops of her hair framing her face and falling over each other in the slight breeze. "Oh, that was for not intervening in the fight."

"I didn't know that was my responsibility."

She gave him a sharp look, as though she suspected he was being disingenuous on purpose. When she apparently discerned that his confusion was authentic she shook her head, lips thinning. "Don't you listen to anything your father teaches you?" she demanded.

"Of course I do!" he said defensively.

"Then what is the correct action of a lord upon witnessing iniquity amongst his subjects?"

Sesshoumaru wanted to kick himself. "To rectify it," he replied.

"Exactly. Would you like to tell me why you chose to allow that display of barbarism in my garden instead of intervening and putting a stop to it?"

Sesshoumaru sighed. "Because a man never raises a hand to a woman unless she is an enemy," he told her. Across the back of his mind the angry face of his father floated, and he remembered the feel of claws digging into his cheeks as he was lifted from the ground and thrown into the side of the storehouse, in punishment for slapping a female cousin in retaliation for a sleight he could not remember. He remembered the lesson, though.

In front of him her eyes softened, and the line of tension in her neck that he had

not noticed until then melted away. "I see," she said. "But what about the boy? He was weak - why did you not help him?"

His brow furrowed as he tried to recall his thoughts. "Because a boy should learn to be strong, and pain tempers the soul," he said finally.

"I see," she said again. He watched as she brought her kimono-clad hands to her face, as though hiding a smile from him. She appeared to be thinking.

"Sesshoumaru," she said after a moment, "how old was that boy?"

He shrugged, unsure as to where she was taking this train of thought. "He looked young - perhaps half my age," he hazarded. Youkai ages were so difficult to pinpoint - he himself looked like a human being would look at ten years, but he was far, far older than that. The boy was not nearly as strong nor as pure as he, so he might have been ten years old, twenty years, even fifty years, or he might have been as old as he appeared - around five or so. Either way, he was clearly young.

His mother was nodding. "So he was a child?" she said.

This seemed like a trick question. "...yes?" he ventured.

She giggled at his hesitation. "And the girl, she was a child as well?"

"They were all children."

"They are all weak," she said.

Sesshoumaru opened his mouth to protest that the weak needed to learn to be strong or perish, but she raised a hand. "Ah!" she said. "Tell me, son: when a child is hurt, who suffers the most because of it?"

He was about to answer, "the child," but sensed a trap and thought better of it. He tried to think back to the times when he was much younger and could still cry at minor injuries. He would fall, or hit something too hard, scrape his knee or his hand, and then there was the cut and the wail, and then his mother was always there, drying his tears and holding him close, smelling anxious and protective and

warm -

His mouth twisted. "Its mother suffers the most," he replied.

"And a mother is always...?"

He saw the point she was making. "A female."

"Right!" she smiled at him. "A female. So, by not protecting children, you are actually hurting...?"

Sesshoumaru sighed. This lordship thing seemed to get more and more complicated every day. "A woman."

"Which a man does not do, unless she's an enemy," his mother filled in the last parts herself. "So it is your duty to protect children not because they are weak - though that is also a perfectly acceptable reason - but because the pain they suffer spreads to those you should never injure, even if the injury is through neglect."

"I can't protect all children," he protested.

She snorted. "Well. no one expects you to. You do the task in front of you, not all the tasks in the world, because not even you can do that, no matter how fast or strong you are."

Something must have flashed across his face then, because she frowned. "What's wrong?"

Sesshoumaru thought of his failure that morning. "I'm not fast anyway," he said.

"Is this about your training today? With the birds?"

He nodded, wondering how she knew. He watched her face break into her grin, her fangs appearing eerily white in the shade of the tree. "Your father told me about it. He said your progress is wonderful."

"But not perfect," he replied.

Her grin faded a little, and she looked almost disappointed before she slid her eyes away from his and out across the garden. "No," she said, "not perfect. But nothing is."

"Well, I can try," he said, trying to erase the sadness that had settled across her face.

It seemed to work, as she turned to him and grinned again. "Yes, you can," she replied. "And now let's go inside and have lunch. Breaking up fights makes me famished."

Sesshoumaru smiled one of his rare smiles that he reserved for her, and they went in the house together.

. . .

Sesshoumaru looked sixteen when his mother died.

The illness had been a long one, one that they could all smell but none could cure, so her family stood helplessly by as she wasted away, deteriorated before their eyes, and was gone in one turn of the seasons, disappearing into the fluttering fold between summer and autumn. They burned her until nothing of her remained behind; there was no memorial, nothing to mark her existence, nothing to say, here, she was here. As though she had stepped out through a window and into a mist she faded from view; only the wave of her wild silver hair and the soft swell of an indigo sleeve could be seen as she fell away into the world, and then they, too, were gone, as if they had never been.

Though this was the first grief his heart had ever known, Sesshoumaru did not cry. He did not speak either; it felt as if her death had dropped into him, sending out a ripple, a swell, a wave that washed over his mind and swept it clean of words. He had nothing to say.

Nothing, that is, until he found out about Izayoi.

It was just rumors at first, trickling in only two weeks after his mother had passed out of the land of the living: the Inu no Taisho had a lover.

At first Sesshoumaru brushed these rumors aside in imitation of his mother's nonchalance, but they grew more insistent, increasingly detailed: she was young, she was a hime, she was human. She had long black hair, a small, sweet face, demure bearing - everything his mother had not been.

And then more. The Inu no Taisho loved her. He had first taken her to bed when Lady Takara had fallen ill.

She was pregnant.

When he finally confronted his father, it was the last time he saw him alive.

His father was preparing for battle, strapping on his armor, readying his sword, tying his hair in his customary style, and Sesshoumaru stood behind him, watching him prepare.

"Is it true?" he demanded, and he reflected that his father had taught him well in one way at least: his voice betrayed no emotion. He wasn't even certain he felt anything at all.

Before him, his father's hands stilled as he tightened the straps that held his armor in place, as though thinking, and Sesshoumaru didn't have to hear his quiet yes to know the answer. And it turned out he wasn't as mature as he thought he was, because his youki flared and a snarl curled his lips as he turned to leave.

"My son."

Sesshoumaru stopped, though he did not turn around.

"I am going to fight; there is a challenge against me," his father said, and his once rich voice fell flat upon the floor. He didn't have to say why - the rumors were true, so his weakness was plain as sunlight. She was vulnerable, expendable, and his father was devoted to her, this thing so brief and frail. Anyone who would

allow himself to love a perfect pawn, a thing so easily turned into a wound, was weak, and weak leaders are not leaders for long.

Sesshoumaru waited as his father took a deep breath and ruined all.

"If I should not return, you have an obligation."

"I do not."

"You do!" His father never raised his voice in anger, and in his skin, Sesshoumaru shuddered.

"You do," his father said again, quietly. "Your brother. You cannot let him die."

For a long moment Sesshoumaru said nothing, could not find the words, could not dredge his voice from the depths of his chest. What words could tell his father of the depth of his betrayal, of how little his traitorous actions deserved recognition? What words could convey the end of his affection?

Finally he opened his mouth.

"I can."

Sesshoumaru left, and never promised his father that he would see to his new child. When his father died against Ryuukotsusei in the cold of the coming winter, Sesshoumaru wondered how difficult it had been to choose between his child and the people who depended on his strength. Perhaps he didn't choose; perhaps he thought he would survive.

Perhaps he thought his son would grant his last request.

When he heard his father was dead, Sesshoumaru left the House of the Moon to find his father's mistress and kill her.

It was not difficult to find her - every species loves to gossip, loves to know what is going on, and so he found himself before a castle one dark night, listening to the cries of the sentries as they tried to determine who he was. He did not answer

their queries, merely leapt over the walls and listened to their calls grow to shrieks of surprise and alarm. The youkai, they yelled, and he knew they thought he was his father, the one who had defiled their princess.

But who cared what humans thought, after all? He landed inside the gates and strolled up the steps to the house, turning only once to slice arrows out of the air. They fell around his feet and he turned and continued into the grand mansion before him.

The floors were slick, and all around was the stench of fear and despair, the smell of humans who fear death, and he stalked from room to room, following the faint scent of a pregnant female, not even bothering to kill those who tried to block his path.

He found her in a dark room, sequestered away from everyone. She had no maidservants with her, and only the light of the moon from the window illuminated her form.

The rumors had been right - she was nothing like his mother, nothing like the love of his father's life who had been so easily abandoned. She crouched on the floor, frozen in fear, her hands circling round her swollen belly protectively, as though she could soothe the baby inside her, as though she could save him with only her love.

She was weeping, large, silent tears, and the bright white smell of her terror cut sharply through her motherly scent.

"Please," she begged, curled around the child that would kill her if something was not done soon. "Please, spare us. Spare him!"

He ached to kill her. She was an enemy. She was a stain. She had defiled the purity of his house, the tranquility of his family.

He couldn't stop staring at her hands, her fingers without claws, gentle and trembling as they moved over her child, hidden in her body, the child that would be entombed soon enough. He looked up into her large, pleading eyes, glossy with tears, and he felt a stab of searing blue pain lance through his chest.

Mothers and children, he thought distantly, his mind buckling beneath him, tipping him over, betraying him. Children and women. He wondered if his mother had meant this when she had taught him that duty.

Growling, he turned and leapt from the window into the snow, fingers bare of the blood he sought.

He made the journey. It was the same sort of journey that all who sired hanyou children and wished them to live went through: the long trek, the fight, and the bargaining.

So Sesshoumaru went south and south again, over the islands, into their caves. He fought and defeated the blind fireworm at the final pass, touched down on the shores of the underground lake, took tea with the youkai who tended the plants of the deep and dark that would save the hime and her half-breed son.

"It is not your child?" the old, wizened youkai asked, stroking his strange, mossy beard and pinning Sesshoumaru with a fishy glare.

"It is my father's. The child is my half-brother."

"You don't seem too happy about that."

"I am not."

The youkai pursed his enormous lips. "You could let them die," he said.

"I could."

Sesshoumaru did not waver beneath the heavy gaze. Finally the youkai nodded. "I see. Very well."

"What is your price?"

Giving a sharp laugh as he turned away, the old youkai simply shook his head and would not answer. An hour later Sesshoumaru found himself outside in the

sunlight, a package of weeds and mushrooms in his hands and a miserable anger curdling sour on his tongue. He almost threw the parcel in the ocean.

He did not, though. He returned, once again leaping over the walls in the dead of winter to the tune of frightened guards and moving through the house like a sinister star, pale and shining, dark and cruel.

She was dying, with two maidservants tending her. Her attendants cowered in the corner as he entered the room and gazed down at her wavering form. He listened as her labored breathing filled the room, and when she turned to look at him, her luminous dark eyes were just sad voids in her painfully thin face. Her child was killing her, and she was killing him in turn. They would die together.

Sesshoumaru tossed the package at one of the maidservants, who shrieked when it hit the back of the upraised hands that shielded her face. It dropped to the ground, making a damp sound as it bounced twice on the floor before coming to a standstill.

"Boil that," he ordered. "Make her drink it. Be ready for the birth."

He turned to the window by which he had left when last he'd been there, but a choking sound stopped him.

"S... sess..."

He looked over his shoulder. She was trying to sit up, and one of the maids was holding her down. When she saw that he had turned, she ceased her struggles, falling back.

"Sesshoumaru," she said. She knew his name, and he had to fight to keep his lip from curling into a warning growl. She was oblivious to his disgust.

"Thank you." Her voice was edged in a grateful sob. "Thank you."

He left, and never told her he would kill her son.

. . .

Kagome sat quietly in the dark and tried to glue the pieces of her brain back together. She wasn't doing very well. Entirely aside from the sudden sadness that woke in her breast at the sound of Inuyasha's name, a great deal of difficulty stemmed from all her past experiences. For almost two minutes she tried to take this new bit of information and jam it in between the other bits she knew, but it just wasn't fitting properly. In fact, there didn't even seem to be any room for it anywhere in her list of Sesshoumaru's attributes. She had cruel, bloodthirsty, remorseless, merciless, sadistic, weirdly honorable, not entirely poor conversationalist, decent company, fondness for little girls - which, given one's perspective, could be either completely consistent with the other aspects of his personality or merely a benign anomaly - wants to kill Akiyama's infant son, tried to kill me, saved me, fought with us, and hated his brother and wanted him dead. At the very least, the last one was in direct opposition to his declaration that he had saved Inuyasha and his mother from certain death, and she did not possess the mental agility necessary for the acrobatics required to fit all both bits of information in her head at once.

Sesshoumaru was silent. She shifted in the warm blackness of the cave.

"Um," she said.

He didn't move. Kagome took this as, if not encouraging, then at least sign that was not discouraging. She decided to go for it. "Er, keeping in mind that I am most definitely not calling you a liar," she ventured, "I don't believe you."

Sesshoumaru shifted. "That is calling me a liar, and why not?" he asked. Kagome strained to hear an edge of malice in his voice, but he just sounded tired.

"Well, you did try to kill Inuyasha a lot, for starters," she pointed out.

"That is not inconsistent with my actions."

"Yes, it is."

"How so?"

"Because if you wanted him dead, you would have just let him and his mother die," she pointed out, trying to ignore the nagging suspicion that she was failing to grasp a basic and fundamental concept. Perhaps Sesshoumaru simply showed his affection by putting his entire hand through one's stomach. Maybe removing one's liver was just his way of saying it's good to see you, what a fine day, care for some sake? Oh, my mistake. Let's have tea instead. Maybe Inuyasha had been into that sort of thing, and Sesshoumaru was only kindly acquiescing to his wishes, although thinking about that just brought up all sorts of issues that were probably best left untouched. Kagome shoved the thought out of her brain and waited for him to answer.

After a moment, she heard him sigh. "I was not trained to kill women and children; when the time came, I could not," he said tersely. "That is all you need to know."

Kagome frowned. "You tried to kill me," she pointed out helpfully. "And Kouga said you wanted to kill his baby grandson, an action which, I might add, I do not approve of at all. And you didn't even have to kill them - you could have just not done anything."

"I did try to kill you," he agreed, tackling her first assertion, "but at the time you were an enemy."

"So you can kill women if they're enemies?"

"Yes, though I have relaxed my standards since my youth."

Kagome did not find this comforting. "You mean, you have less of a problem killing women now?"

There was a rustle of clothing which might have been a shrug. "Since sparing Inuyasha and his mother brought down an excess of troubles on me - an excess that could have been at least stemmed if I killed him, even later in life - I have decided that strict adherence to that aspect of my training might, in certain circumstances, be overlooked. I have also learned that a direct attack is not necessary for one to be considered an enemy."

He spoke of killing so blandly, as if it were something he didn't have to think about. Which he didn't. He was a demon. Kagome felt cold, and burrowed deeper underneath her blanket. "So if you had to do it again, would you have let them die?" she asked, her voice small even in the confines of the cave.

He took almost a full minute to answer, and she thought he was going to ignore her question until he gave a slight cough. "It is pointless to speculate on that," he said carefully. "Though I will admit that life would have been a good deal less exciting had I allowed them to perish."

Ha! she thought. That's good enough for me. But... "I still don't get it. You didn't even have to do anything - you wouldn't have been directly responsible for their deaths if you hadn't gone," she insisted.

He snorted softly. "That is incorrect. Failure to act honorably is just as grievous as acting dishonorably."

A small part of her secretly suspected that this explanation was not the entirety of his reasons for acting the way he did. She thought of his little girl. "You still don't like killing women and children, do you?" she asked, though it was more of a small revelation that only needed confirmation than a question.

He granted it. "Not really," he said. "I try to avoid it whenever possible."

"Then why do you want to kill the baby?"

She heard him sigh. "Because Kouga owes me a life."

"Why?"

"That is really not any of your business."

Kagome bit her lip, chastised. "I'm sorry. It just seems... I don't know, would you have really killed the baby if Kouga hadn't forced you to take this mission?"

"Do you think I wouldn't?" he asked after a moment, and he seemed genuinely curious.

She wondered what he was waiting for her to say. She wondered if a life hung on her words. She wondered why she thought he cared about her opinion on the matter. With trepidation she cleared her throat. "I think you wouldn't," she announced. "You wouldn't kill a baby." With a jolt of surprise, she found that she was telling the truth.

He seemed amused. "And why do you think that?"

Kagome sniffed. "Because you are honorable, in your own way. Because I think that when the time came again, you would find that it's beneath you to kill an infant."

"Perhaps," he said, and she thought she heard a note of sadness in his voice, though what that note would be ringing for, assuming it was there at all, was impossible to tell.

Sadness. Something tugged at her heart. "Do you like children?" she wondered out loud.

"I do not mind them terribly much."

Kagome closed her eyes and thought of Inuyasha; less than a decade separated them, but he was still in her heart. Faded now, drifting into the background, but always, always there.

The demon next to her was almost fifty years from the place where he had been dismantled. Even though she tried to choose her words carefully, when they came out they felt wrong, as though they filled her mouth with angles that were difficult to speak around, that pierced her tongue and made it impossible to talk without pain.

"Do you - do you still miss her?"

He was silent for a long time, and when he did speak, his voice sounded almost rusty, as though the words he used to speak of her had corroded with neglect. "At the strangest times," he said, and he sounded both far away from her, and so

close he might as well have been beneath her skin.

She was silent, and he seemed to be waiting. Then, "Why do you ask?" he said softly.

She shook her head, swallowing around the lump in her throat, wondering the same thing herself, wondering why she had to bring it up. "I was just wondering if it went away eventually." Her voice didn't crack.

Sesshoumaru remembered her grief when they had first spoken alone, the tears that he smelled but that failed to fall. "You still think of them," he said.

The air inside the little cave suddenly seemed heavy with their thoughts, and Kagome had trouble sucking enough into her lungs to respond.

"Almost every day," she replied finally, voice strangled.

She heard him breathing slowly as he turned this over in his head. "You yourself said that it felt like forever," he told her finally. "And our griefs are different."

She gave a watery laugh. "Did I say that?"

"You don't remember?"

She shook her head. "Maybe if I did I wouldn't be so sad," she told him. "It seemed to have worked for you."

"You do not act sad," he said. With a jolt she realized that she didn't, for the most part. The burden of lost love - it was there, but it did not bow her shoulders; it lived in her heart, but it did not anchor it. Feeling strangely light, she wondered when she had shed her mourning.

He rustled in the silence. "Tell me, miko," he said, "if you had it to do again, would you?"

She swallowed and closed her eyes. She thought of the fairytale happiness she had been able to give her love and her former self. She thought of the friends she

had gathered to her, who were now only ghosts clutched to her heart. She thought of things lost and gained, irreparable, irrevocable, irreplaceable.

"I think so," she said finally. "And you?"

Sesshoumaru knew what she was asking. Almost unconsciously his hand drifted to the hilt of Tenseiga, and he remembered what it felt like to erase the damage done.

"I think so as well," he said, very quietly, and the memory of how he had looked in the firelight at their first meeting drifted across her mind.

"I'm sorry," she said softly. "I didn't mean to bring that up."

He rustled again, and the tension seemed to snap; she could breathe again.

"Do not worry about it," he murmured. "You should try to sleep."

She just nodded and turned away from him. She stared into the blackness, and in her chest she felt an ache that for a moment she could not identify, but after a second of puzzlement she suddenly realized what it was.

Kagome felt helpless. She had stirred his sadnesses, called up his despair, and now she had no way to comfort him, to obscure those things again. She had done it once - or maybe she had stirred them just enough that he had been galvanized into action by the pain - but she wasn't certain she could comfort him with only words, and the wrong words could ruin everything. It would be so much easier if she could touch him. The impulse to embrace him caused her arms to tense involuntarily, but she quickly squashed the inclination, as in a flash she realized that she wished also that he would hold her and soothe away the lingering pain. She needed to be embraced. Kagome tried to suppress the blush that spread across her face, though she was not certain why she was embarrassed.

I keep hoping I'm strong enough, she thought. I keep hoping I won't need anyone again.

But she still wanted to need someone, and that knowledge left her full of an

emptiness that she knew might never be erased.

Kagome curled around her aching heart and closed her eyes.

She was sinking into sleep. Sesshoumaru listened to her settle further in and wondered why they had slipped back into things so dark he'd thought to keep them from everyone, had thought to lock them away forever.

He wondered if she was right about the baby, about him, and it was almost painful to realize that he hoped she was.

Sesshoumaru ran a hand over his face, as though he could wipe away his small revelations. She was confusing him again, and this time not with her strange words and constant chatter, but with her sparse and simple words that called up things forgotten, turned them over, let them settle again in a different pattern. Would he have let them die, if he had his life to do over? Would he have given all of this up for something unknown? Would he do it the same way again?

He truly did not know.

In his chest he felt a curl of exhilaration drift up, like smoke, and he thought, very quietly, that if he had chosen differently he would not have known Rin, would not have reached his peace with his father's decision, would not have understood how dear his life was had he not lost it all and gained it back again. Would not be strong. Would not be sitting in a cave on a desolate mountain, listening to this strange, frustrating priestess sink into sleep. Would not, at this moment, find himself strangely content.

Of course, tomorrow they would venture back out into the cold, and he would remember why he was in a bad mood, but now it didn't seem as burdensome as he had believed. Right now, he was warm, almost comfortable, and, most importantly, purposeful. He had things to do: pay his debts, fulfill his obligations, return home, rule, lead, reign.

He wondered if she knew the enormity of what she had given him.

In the darkness, Sesshoumaru closed his eyes, listened to the rhythm of Kagome's

breath, and sank into stillness.

. . .

Sesshoumaru had to admit that changing his mind about carrying her had its advantages. For one, they were going far faster than they would have ever managed with her on foot. For another, choosing to carry her on his back was both less tiring for him, and more dignified for her. Not to mention the priceless look on her face when he had swept his hair to the side and offered his back to her.

"Are you certain?" she'd asked, hesitating, clearly hoping that he was.

"Do you enjoy the mountains so much that you wish to linger here longer than necessary?" he'd replied.

"No."

"Very well. This will allow the greatest amount of haste. Let us depart."

Not bothering to ask him again she'd gripped his shoulders and he'd looped his arms beneath her knees, hoisting her against his sides and avoiding his weapons. When he was satisfied she was secure, he'd leapt away, taking a small amount of satisfaction in her quick intake of breath at his speed.

So the decision was a good one for a number of reasons. On the other hand, this meant she could prattle directly in his ear.

Her awe and gratitude had, unfortunately, quickly waned. "Are we there yet?" she asked for the fiftieth time, clearly believing that asking would speed his steps, when all it did was prompt him to silently revisit his earlier threats to toss her into the void below them, though now that she had decided he wasn't a creature entirely without honor those threats would most likely have little effect. He sighed mentally, weighing his options.

He could throw her back over his shoulder. He could tear off a strip of his kimono

and stuff it in her mouth. He could bash his head repeatedly against a rock until he lost his hearing.

Or he could always ask her.

"Are we there yet?" she said. For some reason he heard a smile in her voice. He ignored it.

"No. Do not ask me that again."

She harumphed, displeased, and the puff of warm air she sent across his ear caused a shiver to skitter down his spine, pattering over his skin with tiny paws. His grip on her legs tightened reflexively, as though to still her, which only earned him another gasp before she tripped into her next question. "Ah - um, why not?" she demanded, a little breathlessly.

He thought the answer was obvious. "Because it is annoying," he replied.

On his shoulders, her hands twitched. "Yes, but it's also annoying to not know how long it will take to get there. Like, are we going to have to spend another night in a cave, or what?"

He shrugged. "Most likely."

She made a frustrated noise. "Is it really that far?"

Kagome watched as he turned his head to glance back at her his lips twitching slightly. "I am uncertain," he said finally before turning back to their path.

She groaned inwardly. Did the inability to ask for directions cross species or something? She was ready to get there, do whatever trial by fire they had to do - though, she suspected, it would mostly be his job to prove their worth - grab the medicine and go home. "Why don't you know?" she demanded.

It was his turn to make a frustrated noise at her. "Because the directions are never terribly detailed," he replied snippily. "Did you not wonder why there weren't more hanyou?"

She had to admit that she really hadn't. Kagome felt as though she had forgotten to study for a test. "Er," she hazarded. "Cultural prejudice?"

Sesshoumaru was not entirely certain what she meant by that, but as it didn't sound like, 'because it's really damn difficult to save the child and the mother,' he shook his head. "Because it is dangerous to ensure their survival, and they are not useful, nor are they desirable."

She appeared to digest this for a moment. "You mean," she said, sounding horrified, "they just let their children and their lovers die?"

She really was so sentimental. "For the most part, yes, though the more sociable animals - like the wolves - tend to at least attempt to save any unwanted progeny. To not do so goes against their nature."

"Then why aren't there more wolf hanyous?" she asked.

"Most likely because the wolves tend to avoid getting themselves into such a predicament," he replied, "because they would then feel obligated to walk into the jaws of near-certain death for a child that would do nothing for them or their line."

Kagome felt a trickle of unease. "Wait, what?" she demanded.

Sesshoumaru frowned. "What?" he replied.

Fortunately, she clarified. "Did you say near-certain death? Because I don't recall signing on for near-certain death," she told him. Unconsciously she tightened her grip on him, as though she could shield herself from the unknown terrors ahead by hiding behind him. Which, he supposed, was essentially the plan.

"You are forgetting who I am," he reminded her. "I will certainly not die, especially not for that bastard wolf and his careless son." Still, though he did not necessarily want to admit it, he did feel a little prickle of pride knowing that of all the wolves none of them were strong enough to make this journey, whereas it was merely another diversion for him.

He sighed. Sometimes it was so difficult being the best.

Kagome was still not convinced. "Well, you may not die, but I'm really not that good at not dying," she told him. "I'm all squishy and easily hurt."

He sniffed at this assessment. "Despite your obvious disadvantages, you appear to have managed well enough so far," he replied blandly.

Kagome blinked at his words. Was that a compliment? she wondered. If it had been, it was extremely back-handed, so she said nothing, uncertain of how he had meant his statement. Instead, she rested her chin on his shoulder and tried to swallow the anxiety that had become stuck in her throat.

For a while neither of them spoke, and she watched the barren landscape whisk by them while suppressing the urge to bury her face in his hair. Purely, she insisted to herself, for practical reasons. My cheeks are going to fall off. At least Sesshoumaru was warm - she could feel the heat of his body through his thick kimono - so her fingers were not faring as badly as her face.

Still. "How will you know when we're there?" she asked.

"I suspect that we will find out rather quickly," he said.

Kagome didn't like the sound of that. "What were the directions they gave you?"

He shrugged. "Head north toward the tallest mountain I can find. I am assuming at some point we will discover the trial we have to surmount."

"What is the trial?" she asked, voice wavering.

Sesshoumaru closed his eyes briefly in irritation. "Depends," he sighed. "Sometimes it is a puzzle, but usually it is a fight."

"A fight?" Against his shoulders, he felt her hands quiver as if in anxiety. He frowned as he glanced down at his feet, negotiating a particularly difficult run of footing.

"Yes. For example, I defeated a fire-worm when I made the journey, though there are many different creatures it could be, though the wolves were not certain which creature guarded the way to their medicine woman."

"Uh-huh," she said.

His frown deepened. Now that he thought of it, there might have been a little too much hemming and hawing over that particular detail. Sesshoumaru narrowed his eyes and began to list, as much for himself as for her, the sentries they might be forced to fight.

"Worm, fire-cat, elemental - usually storm or fire, but occasionally wind or water - spider, eagle, crow, kitsune - "

"Dragon," she said.

"Yes, dragons, too, though probably not - "

"No," she said urgently. "Dragon." She pointed.

He nearly stumbled as he looked up, following her direction. They were moving fast across steeply sloped mountainside, in the direction of the junction of two peaks, through which he could see the summit they had been heading for. But that wasn't what caught his eye.

Slowly detaching itself from the little valley between the peaks was the enormous white head of a dragon. He watched as it snaked upwards into the sky, nearly as tall as the mountains that cradled it. Sesshoumaru huffed in annoyance.

"Yes, dragon," he said wearily. It must have felt him approaching. Well, it wasn't as though he hadn't defeated many dragons in the course of his life; they tended to be a nuisance, but nothing that he could not dispatch with moderate expediency.

Heaving a sigh, Sesshoumaru leapt out from the mountainside, in the direction of the valley. His passenger emitted a tiny squeak, though of fear or surprise he

could not tell. It wasn't important at any rate. In less than a minute he touched down behind an outcropping of snow-covered boulders, bracing awkwardly against the slope as he let the miko jump down from his back. She scrabbled in the snow for purchase, hissing at the cold.

"Stay here," he commanded. "This will not take long."

She just nodded, teeth chattering.

And then he leapt away again, drawing Toukijin from its resting place at his hip, and at the base of his spine his muscles curled over themselves, sliding into place, well-practiced, near-perfect, and all along his back he felt the weight of his sword, slumbering in his hand, and in his chest he felt his heart pulling him upwards into battle.

Sesshoumaru smiled faintly as he touched down directly in front of his foe, felt the coils of his power drawing back, down and under, beneath, and then -

He sprang.

The dragon turned its head and gazed at him lazily with one great blue eye, waiting for him to come within striking distance. Sesshoumaru listened to the cold whistle of the wind past his face, smelled the sharp scent of the snow. Just as languidly, he brought Toukijin up to the opposite shoulder for one swift crosswise slice. All around was silent as he glided through the air, each of them waiting for the opportune moment.

His mind was shutting down, into the curious blankness of battle. Instinctively he held back, even as he grew closer and closer, and watched, detached, as the dragon loomed blinding white against the grey sky. They gazed at each other, opponents in the pretrembling of a battle about to burst.

Then dragon belched a cloud of white smoke so large it spread out against the flanking summits, down and up, blooming. Sesshoumaru watched as it thickened, obscuring his enemy.

His eyes narrowed, the steady beat of his heart faltering fractionally before he

brought Toukijin down in one sharp stroke - muscles, sliding cleanly, a good cut - sending its cutting pressure into the cloud, clearing a path. Without hesitation he darted forward and up, into the blinding fog as it silently crashed down around him.

For one endless moment, there was nothing but the whiteness that bound him, disoriented him, and then he felt his skin begin to burn and bubble, his lungs suddenly filled with splinters, throat pierced with poisonous claws so vile he might have cried out if he could have drawn the breath to do so. Immediately he changed course, shooting high up into the air, above the venomous fog and into the clear sky. He coughed, tasted blood, ground his teeth as he somersaulted backwards in midair, away, away.

At the edge of his mind, he could hear the snow hissing, and beneath the snow the mountainside sizzled and melted beneath a poison so strong it wounded even him.

Damn, he thought angrily. He darted forward again, this time slashing quickly, clearing the fog ahead of him just enough to swoop through, but within seconds the air buoyed the poisonous cloud up and inwards, burning him again, forcing him up and away, back down into the valley where he had begun, watching with frustration as it billowed ever outwards like a toxic avalanche.

He would have to take damage. There was no way around it. Swiftly he launched himself in the air, as high as he could go, so far that he could see the dragon curled indolently in its nest, watching him with mild interest. This time, he would be prepared, would be able to clear enough poison away to strike; if the strike was true, it would end this.

He shot downwards, only to meet another rising venomous mist. He strove, blinded, choked, forward, forward, slash - his target eluded him.

Bastard! he growled silently, once again tumbling backwards out of harm's way, his flesh stinging where it healed in the icy air, clothing smoking at the edges. He reached safety within the blink of an eye, scowling, mind racing, wildly searching for the way through. He tensed for another charge, brought a hand up to his mouth, began to wipe away the blood -

"Sesshoumaru!"

The world slowed to a crawl.

His heart stuttered as he pivoted, moving as though through water. Blades of ice through his stomach, he sought out her crimson clothing in the whiteness of the mountainside, found her - there - at the edge of the avalanche, jackknifed, bared his teeth, plummeted - horror - hand outstretched, striving, closer, closer, there, closer closer closer almost -

Kagome screamed again as the cloud crested, crashed, and swallowed her whole.

Tales from the House of the Moon
by
Resmiranda

Chapter Nineteen

"Nothing in life is so exhilarating as to be shot at without result."
- Winston Churchill

. . .

Later, when she was more coherent, Kagome would determine that the scream had saved her lungs by consistently expelling air, and the boulders had saved her life by blocking the smoke for that split second Sesshoumaru needed to reach her.

Right now, though, Kagome laid her chin on Sesshoumaru's shoulder and composed a letter.

Dear adrenal glands, she thought.

Thank you ever so much for the lovely gift of adrenaline, because suddenly I am no longer cold! It's wonderful to be able to feel my fingers again, and the blood is just fabulous. I believe I am also thinking faster as well, and I am not quite so pale any longer! You've made my entire day.

Much love,
Kagome

P.S. If you see my lungs, please tell them to stop lazing about and do a proper day's work.

Satisfied, she mentally folded the letter and sent it off to her internal organs post haste before returning to the pressing task of living, which was, at the moment, much more difficult than it should be.

Again she labored to draw air, sucking in as much as she could through a sharp throat, but once again her diaphragm was not up to the task. Kagome also suspected that she had cracked a rib or two, which was much better than being dead, but not as good as escaping unscathed. Dimly, she was enormously grateful to whichever god had dictated that Sesshoumaru ditch the spiky look.

It had all happened so quickly. She'd watched the smoke rolling down the mountainside, looming larger and larger; she would not have felt so nervous if, up in the sky, the distant figure of Sesshoumaru apparently having a very difficult time hadn't been so immensely worrying.

She watched him, hoping he would succeed, but as the smoke rolled closer and closer she began to suspect that she might be somewhat alone on this one. If she squinted, she could see him darting away, attempting to avoid the cloud as though it hurt him. Which, given how powerful he was, made her stomach roil. She turned back to the approaching avalanche and tried to think of ways to save her skin; unfortunately, she had only one tried and tested method.

I wish I had a gas mask, she thought giddily, drawing an arrow and nocking it in her bow. She felt her powers spark and flare into life, warming her hands,

coursing through her fingers and to the arrow she held, and then she'd released it into the cloud, hoping desperately that the smoke was based on shouki and could be purified.

The arrow landed at the edge of the rolling cloud. Kagome squinted, her heart leaping in her chest when she saw the arrow purify the poison, only to stutter again when the arrow faded rapidly before going out, and the hissing venom crashed around the void left by her purification.

"Shit, shit, shit!" she'd muttered, slinging her bow across her back and huddling behind the largest boulder. She crouched in the snow, hoping against hope that the smoke would die down before it reached her, but instead it loomed, closer, closer, gobbling the mountain in its path, swelling up, spreading poisonous fingers ever toward outward, seeking her. Her blood drained from her limbs, leaving her colder than she had ever been. Kagome felt the world disintegrating around her.

Oh, god no -

She couldn't see straight, was dizzy, would never outrun it, couldn't even breathe, closer, almost there, and she was alone, she was going to die, and she could not stop the shriek that clawed up her throat.

"Sesshoumaru!"

God, she would give anything for him to be there, but Kagome couldn't even see him, he was so high up, so far away, out of reach, and the cloud there, thick, large, overshadowing the world, and she sat in the snow, covered her head, and screamed -

- for maybe one second, and then Sesshoumaru slammed into her, his armor knocking her breath from her body, left arm snaking around her waist like a band of iron holding her askew against him, and then he darted forward, the poison wave spilling over, over, above them, above -

- and missing him by inches as he slipped out from underneath its crest. Then they were flying low, down and out, skimming against the snow, and she could see the cloud over his shoulder, crashing down, chasing him down the mountainside.

The icy wind whipped through her hair, and she could feel the cold emanating from the snow beneath them. Kagome struggled for breath, her face pressed against his throat - it was funny how the world came into sharp focus when one was about to die, and he was so warm, smelled like thunderstorms - and squeezed her eyes shut. This is not happening, she thought. We'll be all right. He is the strongest demon in the world. He will not suffer the ignominy of getting killed by an overgrown newt. He will not end his life over a stupid wolf who forgot to wear a rubber. He will not allow himself to suffocate in dragon barf.

He will not let me die.

Finally, she drew a full breath, opened her eyes, and looked over his shoulder.

The cloud was receding, or slowing down, or he was speeding up. Whatever was happening, it didn't matter - they were escaping. Kagome let out a whimper of relief, her arms tightening around his shoulders as she felt him bend at the waist, tucking her into the cradle of his body before his feet sunk into the snow and he sprang away again, further out of the path of the toxic avalanche. After less than a minute she couldn't see the cloud any longer, and he sank and sprang again, redirecting them further across the mountain, and Kagome thought that she could get used to flying low beneath an overcast sky - without the mortal peril, of course - so she concentrated on breathing and looked at the clouds as he sprang further and further away.

Sesshoumaru listened to her regain her breath and tried to figure out how to stop. For the past two jumps he'd been trying to get purchase on the icy slope beneath him - if not to stop then to at least leap further into the air instead of leveling out near ground level - but he was going too quickly to maneuver. He wasn't entirely certain it would have made a difference anyway, as the snow beneath him was too deep and his shoes kept losing traction. It really was most vexing.

He tried to slow his momentum as he sprang again. It didn't work. To add insult to injury he thought the ends of his hair might be singed, and he could still smell the faint stench of his lightly burned clothes. Sesshoumaru wrinkled his nose and attempted to burrow in Kagome's floral-scented hair without being too obvious about it.

Another leap later and he was getting slightly desperate. This time he had tried to sharpen the fold of his body in order to dig his heels into the ground, but the young woman cradled in his arm prevented him from the necessary contortion. He sighed. There was nothing for it.

"Prepare," he ordered her.

He felt the skin of her cheek move against his throat, and he caught a faint, "what?" before it was whipped away on the wind as he flipped them over and curled himself around her, skimming against the snow. There was a long moment of soft silence before he began to sink down further, plowing into the powdery drifts and leaving a deepening trench in his wake.

Kagome gave a squeak of surprise as they began to descend, her hands slicing against the icy blanket that covered the ground. The cold stole her breath. She felt her fingers go instantly numb, and then they were lower and lower and Sesshoumaru hit solid ground, skidding to a stop so sudden that it flung her forward, face first into the white wall that arched over them.

The cold burned. She thought she heard the bones of her skull crack beneath the weight of it. For a few seconds she didn't move, too blinded and winded and freezing to do much of anything, until she felt them slipping sideways, the precursor to a tumble down the steep slope.

"Um!" she pointed out.

Sesshoumaru had been lying beneath her, very quietly, trying not to think about the fact that his face was now firmly wedged between her breasts. After only a moment he had realized that it was impossible to not think about that, and he reverted to attempting to not think about how soft and warm she was. It was a terribly embarrassing position in which to find himself, but on the other hand her breasts were quite nice, and, on the whole, the universe was probably treating him far better than he deserved for failing to defeat the dragon and save the girl in a manner that did not involve breaking her ribs.

It was her nervous utterance - he could feel the vibrations against his nose - that

brought him back to the immediate reality of the situation, which was that it was extremely cold, becoming soaked was inevitable, there was a damn great lizard hoping to dissolve them into so much organic goop, and they were about to go rolling down the mountainside.

Sesshoumaru refrained from pursing his lips in thought, and surveyed his options. Problem one: cold. There was no heat anywhere around them, and as Sesshoumaru did not fancy setting fire to himself, there was no way around that. Problem two: getting wet. Unless Tenseiga had powers of which he had been previously unaware, there was nothing he could do about that either. Problem three: damn great lizard. He had attempted to dispatch that particular complication with all due expedience, but the dragon was a rather stubborn one, and until he had a new plan of action, nothing could be done. Problem four: impending terminal tumble down the mountain.

He nearly sighed with relief. This was a problem he could solve. Toukijin still lay in his right hand, all but forgotten in their rapid escape, and he tightened his grip on it. Gritting his teeth, Sesshoumaru rolled very slightly up the mountainside, tipping Kagome further into the snow bank - her warmth left his face, and he felt ever so slightly disappointed about that - then flipped the sword in his hand and drove it into the ground at a steep angle directly beneath them. He pushed himself up and away before he twisted his body enough to wedge a foot between the blade and the ground. It wasn't the best of footholds, but it would have to do.

Half beneath him, Kagome was trying to concentrate on keeping her bow intact, but kept getting distracted by the way he was pressed against her. She squirmed as he rolled away and sat up, taking her with him. They were covered in snow.

For a minute neither of them said anything. Both of them simply stared down the mountainside and tried to regain coherency, and Kagome attempted to rub some life back into her face with her sleeves.

Finally Kagome cleared her throat.

"Shit," she declared.

Sesshoumaru gave a dry laugh. "I am inclined to agree," he said as she shifted

against him. He watched with amusement as she tried to gain a solid position without touching him, but eventually she gave up and wedged a hand down the front of his armor and held on, avoiding his gaze.

"Shit," she said again.

"So we have established."

She shook her head. "I'm sorry, I don't usually swear, but damn." Sesshoumaru found it difficult to believe that anyone who had spent a considerable length of time in his half-brother's company would be embarrassed by swearing, but he just nodded.

Her brain felt numb. It wasn't a pleasant feeling, and though all she wanted to do was stare off into the distance and try to recover from nearly dying, she simply didn't have the time to bother with mental health. Kagome blinked a few more times before heaving a sigh. "Well," she said, breaking the stillness, "what do we do now?"

Sesshoumaru pursed his lips very slightly. "We defeat the dragon and continue onwards," he replied, attempting to shake the snow from his trailing sleeve.

She didn't say anything, and after a moment he looked down at her to find an expression of trepidation on her face.

"You have an objection?" he asked archly.

Kagome considered. Because you did so well last time, did not seem like the wisest of remarks. Neither did, sure, I like getting killed, especially as he might take that information to heart. She shivered in her wet clothes and tried to think of an answer that wouldn't anger him.

"Um," she ventured, "do you have a different plan this time?"

The hand around her waist twitched, and Sesshoumaru did not answer for a moment. "Not as of yet," he said finally.

Her mouth twisted. Right now, he reminded her ever so slightly of his brother; Inuyasha had tended to do the same thing over and over again, expecting different results each time. His propensity for waving that damn great sword over and over had nearly destroyed it once or twice, and made their enemies stronger several times. It had become such a predictable routine that she could almost see his train of thought when confronted with an enemy.

Nothing can stand up to Tessaiga! he would think before throwing himself at his opponent and slashing with his sword. If it had little to no effect, he was usually hit and tossed backwards, landing on the ground some feet away where he promptly proceeded to forget everything that had happened in the last five seconds.

Nothing can stand up to Tessaiga! he would think again, and then start the process over.

Kagome suspected that Sesshoumaru would have tried to engage in that same sort of silly behavior right now if he didn't have her hanging around his neck - and off his armor - like an albatross.

"Perhaps we could go around the mountain and slip in the back way?" she postulated.

He shook his head, dislodging a few chunks of ice. "The dragon is, essentially, an enemy sitting in an easily defended fortress on high ground, equipped with superior weaponry. It takes very little effort to defend an area surrounded by mountains, and it would simply move to wherever we decided to seek passage."

Kagome screwed up her face. This did not sound good. "Then what do you do in this sort of situation?" she asked.

The demon shrugged. "Not engage said enemy."

"Yeah, well, that's not an option, is it?" she replied, frustration making the edges of her voice fuzzy.

"No, it is not," he agreed.

"So what are we going to do?"

"We are going to sit here in the snow and think of a plan."

Against him, Kagome shivered again. "How long do you think that will take? Because I think I might die eventually."

Sesshoumaru scowled. "It will take less time if you cease your drivel," he informed her.

"Hey - !"

"Useful propositions only," he snapped, tightening his grip on her.

"Well, I thought it was useful," she muttered, sticking her nose in the air and attempting to be as haughty as a shivering girl covered in snow could be.

"Indeed."

Frowning, Kagome huffed in annoyance, trying to think of a way around this problem. She worried her lower lip, frowned, and stared at nothing, as though willing the answer to materialize in the snow.

"I suppose," she said slowly, "that I could shoot all my arrows. That might purify that smoky stuff long enough for you to get in there and kill it."

He looked at her in slight surprise. "Your arrows purify the poison?" he demanded.

"Well," she said, "not for very long. There is quite a lot of smoke, and I can only do so much with one arrow, you know."

Twisting his lips slightly, Sesshoumaru narrowed his eyes. "You purified that boar youkai rather spectacularly," he reminded her. "Perhaps you would be so kind as to do that again?"

"Hey, I've only done that a couple of times in my entire life," she said sharply. "It's not like I'm holding out on you or anything."

"You did not immediately mention that you could purify the poison," he pointed out.

"Well, since the purity runs out of the arrows fairly quickly against all that stuff, it didn't seem terribly important," she replied.

Sesshoumaru appeared to be thinking, and Kagome nervously pulled herself a little further up the slope, the emptiness beneath her dizzying in its depth.

"At what times can you purify without the aid of arrows?" he asked suddenly.

Her mouth twisted as she tried to remember. "Only when I don't actually have any arrows, now that I come to think of it," she said after a moment. "And it generally shows up when I'm terrified that I'm about to be killed."

"So," the demon said speculatively, "if I were to carry you into battle with me, you would be able to call up these powers?"

"What? No!" she exclaimed, a jolt of anxiety spearing through her stomach at the thought of diving headlong toward a poisonous dragon.

She wasn't looking at him, but she was positive he had just raised an eyebrow in disdainful disbelief. "Whyever not?" he asked.

"Because I think I believe that you wouldn't let me die," she said, and she found herself blushing slightly for reasons she could not pinpoint, but she brushed her embarrassment aside. "You know, with the 'protecting women and children' deal that you have going, which is still, I might add, really weird. But yeah, that sort of puts a damper on the whole fear of mortal peril.' Besides, I might purify you, too. I can't really control it, you know."

Sesshoumaru tried to pick out the parts of the conversation that were useful to him and ignore the rest, lest he become confused and subsequently sidetracked. "Hmm," he replied. "So you would not be able to call upon your power even if I

threw you ahead of me?"

Kagome had a brief vision of her body flying through the air like a shrieking hand grenade before shaking her head violently. "I think I'd be too scared of the landing to concentrate on the poison," she said quickly. He didn't respond.

Taking a deep breath, Sesshoumaru tried to clear his mind. He could feel that the answer to their problem lay in her holy powers, even though said powers made him rather nervous. She would definitely need to fear for her life, or, barring that, she needed to find some other conduit to use against the poison. "What else could you invest your power in?" he asked thoughtfully.

Kagome squeezed her eyes shut and tried to think. "Well," she said, "anything, really. But all I have are arrows. My bag is still by those rocks."

"That is unfortunate," he replied. "I would not be at all surprised if it had melted."

"Melted?" she said, voice becoming shrill as she turned in his grasp to glare at him, as though it were his fault that she had left her effects behind. "What do you mean, melted?"

Sesshoumaru frowned, confused. "I mean melted," he repeated, but she wasn't listening.

"Oooooh," she groaned, letting her head fall against the hand that gripped his armor. "That had all my stuff in it. My sleeping bag, my blanket, my soap, my pa - um, stuff," she tripped over what had no doubt been an embarrassing item, but quickly rallied. "Everything. Dammit, dammit, dammit." She let her head lift and fall against her hand several times, as though trying to give herself amnesia.

He sighed. "This is not productive," he said. "All you have is arrows?"

She nodded, still not lifting her head. "And I don't think I can put much more power into anything and have it keep its charge," she said, voice slightly muffled. "I'd have to keep in contact with it to purify the amount of poison that we need to - "

She stopped. Sesshoumaru frowned, attempting to discern her thoughts, but he was completely in the dark as she lifted her head and formed a small ‘o' with her lips. After several seconds of this posture he feared that she had forgotten how to breathe. He shook her slightly.

"Oh," she said when he jolted her, voice small. "I think I know what to do. Oh..."

Annoyance pricked his brain, galvanizing his tongue into action. "Yes?" he said pointedly. "Do you wish to enlighten me as to your brilliant plan?"

Kagome shot him a quick glare before drawing back. "Just let me think about this for a moment," she said crossly. "There are still some logistics to be worked out."

Sesshoumaru sighed and glanced away, down at the grey-white snow that stretched before them. He tried to clear his mind, to achieve that blankness he needed in preparation for the battle ahead, though, if he were to be completely honest with himself, also because he was tired of thinking. If she had a plan, she was entirely welcome to do the thinking for both of them right now. He just wanted a nap. Sesshoumaru closed his eyes, wondering if he could steal a few moments of sleep without her noticing.

"All right," she said suddenly, "I've got it. I - wake up!" Kagome poked him hard in the chest and he opened his eyes irritably.

"I was not asleep," he snapped, rather guiltily.

She frowned. "Do you want to kill this thing or not?"

"I thought it had been well established that I do wish to kill it?" he said, slightly confused.

"Whatever," she replied. "Look, you said you wanted to carry me into battle, right?"

"I did not actually say that in those precise words - "

Kagome stopped herself from rolling her eyes in exasperation. He could be so

thick sometimes. "Fine, but you could carry me, right?" she demanded, cutting him off.

He sniffed, a bit insulted by the interruption. "If the situation warranted it, yes," he said coolly.

"Good. I've only done it once before, but I can use my bow to purify; if the poison is based on shouki, and I think it is, all I'd need to do is hold the bow in front of me, and the poison around would be nullified. And you wouldn't get purified because it would be contained. What do you think?"

His mouth twisted. "And what if you are unable to purify the poison?" he asked. "What if it dissolves your skin upon contact? What if it kills you?"

In her stomach she felt something clench and then flip-flop, sending a little flood of bile to her mouth. She swallowed it with distaste. "Then I die, of course," she said crankily. "But I'll probably die on this mountain anyway, even if I don't die of getting my face melted off. It's cold and I'm going to get hypothermia unless we kill that dragon and get somewhere dry where I can sit by a fire and get warm, dammit!" Kagome was vaguely aware that she was beginning to rave just a little bit, but she found she didn't care. Nothing really mattered except killing that dragon and getting warm again. Her teeth were beginning to chatter.

He said nothing for a long moment. Then he slid a little ways down the slope so he was bending his knees, and hauled her unceremoniously into his lap.

"Eek," she gurgled, both at the sudden vertigo and at his audacity. "I don't think we know each other well enough yet to - " she said through clacking teeth.

He frowned, and she noted that he did not look at all pleased. He looked rather displeased, in fact. No, completely annoyed. That was it. She watched as he unslung the bow from her back and pressed it into her hands before awkwardly slipping his hands inside her sleeves.

"Hey - " she protested feebly, but gave up when he began to rub her arms vigorously. His hands were almost hot against her skin, and she found that it felt good. She was so tired, and his skin on hers was just nice, and his hands were

strong, even though they burned, just a little, with a bit too much friction. Still, it was much, much better than nothing. Kagome closed her eyes and let him warm her.

After about two minutes he stopped and withdrew his hands, and Kagome felt cold again, and oddly bereft until the mechanics of keeping her balance on his lap required that she lean into him, shoulder against his chest. She opened her eyes to find him staring at her. His face was very close.

"Right," he said, as though commanding a regiment. "Practice."

She frowned, confused. "Practice what?"

He looked at her as though she were stupid. Kagome found this incredibly rich coming from a man whose entire modus operandi seemed to consist of stabbing wildly in the dark until he knifed the answer in the kidneys by chance. "Practice using the bow," he clarified. "Unless you wish to go into battle with an untested weapon, though I realize that this has never deterred you before."

She gritted her teeth. "I'll have you know that it has deterred me," she told him haughtily as she propped herself up, away from his face, and lifted the bow into the air so it could not touch him. And then, because she was a fundamentally honest girl, she added, "Just not very often."

Sesshoumaru snickered as she glowered at the bow in her hands and thought of purifying the poisonous smoke. Purifying. She needed to purify something, and she needed her power to come when she called. Kagome concentrated, frowning intensely at the bow in her hands, and strained -

Nothing happened. After a few minutes, nothing continued to happen.

Sesshoumaru sniffed, shifting a little beneath her. "We are in no hurry," he said, in that horribly sardonic tone. "Take your time."

Lips thinning into a white line, Kagome thought very hard about purifying annoying demons with horribly pretty hair. Pretty hair with snow in it. Pretty hair and really warm skin and probably a lot of muscle and she was extremely

disturbed by her own turn of thought, so she thought instead about how often he made her see red. Always teasing her, or prodding her, or vaguely insulting her - he was so horribly, completely, and totally damn frustrating -

In her hand the bow flared to life, and Sesshoumaru made a noise in the back of his throat.

Her heart tripped in her chest. Immediately the light faded and she frantically twisted in his lap to see if she had hurt him, narrowing her eyes when he came into her view. He didn't look injured, but then again she'd seen that he tended to waltz around with that expression on his face all the time, so it was probably not the best indicator. "Are you all right?" she asked anxiously.

He gave her a curt nod. "I am. It is merely..." he trailed off looking thoughtful.

She frowned. "Merely what?" she asked.

Sesshoumaru shook his head. "Your scent changes when you invoke your powers," he told her. "It is merely startling."

"Really?" she asked, perking up. She was suddenly intensely curious. "What do I smell like?" Then she felt a shred of worry drift against her mind. "Wait, I don't smell bad, do I?" she asked.

She thought he almost smiled at that. "No, you do not. At any rate, it smells better than that rank fur you are wearing."

Kagome sniffed. "I can't help it if the wolves aren't the most fastidious animals."

"Indeed. That it is wet does nothing for it, either."

Kagome decided to abandon this line of questioning. She found she did not like the idea that she might repulse him. "So what do I smell like when I do this?" she asked, and this time she found it much easier. She pulled on her power again, letting the bow alight with pale pink fire.

His gaze slid away from hers. "It is... difficult to put into words," he said. "Perhaps

later, after we've succeeded, I shall think of a way to describe it."

Brows drawing down, Kagome narrowed her eyes. She suspected that he was just hoping she would forget, or perhaps he thought that she could be bribed into successfully fighting with such a thing. Which wouldn't have been so irritating if it were not true; she really was quite interested.

Fine, be that way, she thought petulantly, I will get through this alive, and then you'll have to tell me.

She let the bow flare again and again, and after a few minutes she was sure she had the hang of it. "Okay, I'm ready," she announced.

"Excellent," Sesshoumaru replied, "because I believe you are turning my legs numb."

He enjoyed the furious blush of red that flared across her cheeks as he transferred her into the cradle of his left arm again. Sending a cursory glance down the mountain, he found a suitable jumping point. Nodding with satisfaction, he prepared to dislodge Toukijin and head toward it as a thought crossed his mind. He turned to Kagome. "Are your hakama secured?" he asked her.

He watched, almost gratified, as she blushed furiously again. "What a question!" she squeaked, outraged.

Sesshoumaru did not feel like elaborating. "Well?" he demanded.

"Not that it's any of your business, but yes," she said, rather snippily.

"Good," he replied. Without asking her permission - because, really, she didn't have a choice - Sesshoumaru looped his fingers around the tie that fit snugly against the side of her waist, and held her securely to him. He heard her give an offended gasp as he bent, gripped Toukijin's hilt, and launched himself off the side of the mountain, sword in one hand, nearly petrified miko in the other.

Well, he mused as he flipped over in the air, bringing his feet in line with the jutting rock he had chosen as his springboard, there are far worse ways to go into

battle.

As the frigid wind whistled over her cheeks, Kagome tried to swallow her heart again as he tumbled over into a free fall. "You could have warned me," she said angrily, as her voice returned.

He shrugged, eyes trained downwards. "Lift your feet," he commanded.

"What - " she began, but then thought better of it. "Oh, never mind," she said as she complied, curling around the arm at her waist. Her grip on her bow was so tight she thought it might snap.

When Sesshoumaru hit the ground, the hem of her hakama grazed the snow beneath them as he absorbed the shock, crouching so low he might as well have been sitting, before she felt him unwind and leap and she remembered how incredibly powerful he was. She couldn't decide if it reassured her, or made her more nervous. Clenching her teeth so that she would not shiver so much, Kagome trained her eyes ahead of her.

The wind ripped through her clothing as Sesshoumaru shot forward, skimming down and then leaping again, up and across the mountain, toward their opponent. Ahead of them, the great white dragon stirred again, rising languorously against the grey sky, and even though she was freezing, Kagome felt a thin sheen of sweat break out across her forehead. She fervently hoped she wouldn't choke.

The tension was incredible, strung across her like a guitar string about to snap. Sesshoumaru streaked up the slopes toward the cleft in the skyline, saying nothing, and she couldn't even hear his breathing, though she bet that it was even and regular. The dragon did not appear to be overly anxious either, merely stared at them lazily as they advanced. Kagome thought it very unfair that she was the only one about to hyperventilate.

"Be ready," she suddenly heard his voice by her ear, though it was faint against the rush of air about them. Well if he wasn't going to get killed by an uppity lizard, she wasn't either. Kagome squared her shoulders as best she could against him, and thrust the bow outwards.

Silently, they seemed to float through the air, the world arrested in its path as they drew ever closer. In its nest the dragon's head wove about on its neck, like a cobra preparing to strike. And in the endless second when it opened its gaping maw, Kagome thought she could see the end of the world in its throat.

When the dragon prepared to strike, Sesshoumaru felt her breath suddenly speed up, and he risked a glance at her hands in the split second before the dragon spit its poison into the air. They were white-knuckled and trembling on the wood of the bow, but he could see that her jaw was set in a sharp line, her eyes angry and hard; she had the expression of one who had faced down many opponents before, and found their death when she sought it.

Sesshoumaru almost smiled. She would be fine.

And then ahead of them, the dragon roared, and white, powdery smoke gushed forth from its mouth.

He heard her make a strangled noise, and in her hands the bow flared into life, her bright scent suddenly blocking out all other smells, clean and pure and deadly. He tightened his grip on Toukijin, and as the venomous smoke towered above them, before them, in front of them he heard her cry out, a harsh warrior cry, and they were in the middle of it.

As they hit the wall of smoke, the silence was deafening, and for a moment he thought she was going to die, that her magic wouldn't work before she whimpered and the air streaming around them was clear and pure, unpoisoned and unobscured. His grip on her tightened as he brought her closer, in front of him, and she sliced through the corruption around them like a blade, her hands glowing like a star.

It was beautiful. She lit up the cloud that sped by them with pink light, filling their tunnel with eerie shadows, and behind him Sesshoumaru could feel the smoke collapsing inwards into the vacuum she left in her wake. They would have to go straight through - if he dramatically changed his direction, he didn't know how quickly she would be able to purify the poison. He clamped his teeth together, and around Toukijin, his fingers clenched hard enough to leave friction burns, instantly healed.

There was something else on the breeze, too. He thought he could smell something, whipping past him, the scent of broken flesh, but it was so faint that he was uncertain as to whether or not he had smelled it at all, so he forged on, into the billowing fog, the priestess in his grasp illuminating the way.

After a few endless moments, he narrowed his eyes as he spied their exit. Just ahead there was the strange sight of pale-on-pale, white smoke against grey sky, and there was another roar, loud enough to grate against his ears. Kagome did not even flinch, merely stayed still and sure in front of him. He imagined that she did not blink even at the fearsome noise, and he felt irrationally pleased even as before and above them another cloud billowed, and he gently angled them upwards, toward the source, ever nearer to their triumph or their death, toward their victory or defeat. With the acuity of eyes strengthened by adrenaline, he saw Kagome's hands tighten on the bow. The light in front of them flared incandescent.

In his veins, he heard his blood sing out as the world narrowed, and he was so close, so close he could taste its scales sliding over his tongue, could feel the crunch of cartilage and bone against his teeth, and then they broke through the cloud, the dragon towering over them, its great mouth opened wide to drown them, swallow them whole.

Sesshoumaru saw its eyes narrow, heard its jaws close, fangs clacking together like massive stone dropping on massive stone. It sounded like the closing of gates.

He smiled without humor, and raised his sword.

It was still for a long moment until without warning the ponderous head darted forward, as though to strike them, and he twisted in the air, putting a foot out right before its nose hit, its jaws opening again. There was the smell of rotted meat, rank breath, and beneath it the bitter smell of venom, acrid and sour, causing Sesshoumaru's throat to clench.

He pushed off, somersaulted backwards, out up in, and then they were beneath its chin. In his grasp Kagome tensed and turned, holding the flaring bow out next to his shoulder as behind them another great cloud rose up, ballooning outwards.

He felt the air move beneath his feet, and then they, too, were buoyed up through the void, up, up, towards the great scaly throat, and Sesshoumaru pitched to the left, the blade by his side sharp and thirsty for death.

Sesshoumaru lifted Toukijin, straight and true, and shot upwards, arm stiff and aim pure.

The dragon roared again above them a split second before he hit, and then he felt the jolt of impact throughout his entire body. Kagome cried out as his grip tightened around her, but his strength did not fail him. With the ease of a practiced conqueror he drove through the bursting skin, into the meat below, across the pumping veins and through the heavy cartilage of the throat, while above them he heard the roar choke down into a gurgle. Within a second he was through the neck, and he darted away, behind, into the valley beyond, turning to face their defeated opponent. He watched as the head, detached, seemed to float over and down before it slammed into the rock below, and then the neck wavered and collapsed, staining the mountain red beneath it.

They floated backwards. Nestled in the crook of his arm Kagome felt stiff and tense; he could almost discern the trembling left behind by the rush of adrenaline that soared through her veins.

Well, she might be shivering, but Sesshoumaru was extremely pleased. The kill was clean and quick, and they had passed the trial. Now all they needed to do was find the youkai medicine woman who cultivated whatever strange herbs could grow here in the cold, grab them, and go back. Gently he drifted downwards into the valley, finding that the slope tapered to a very gentle incline, leaving a small basin surrounded by peaks in the middle. When they were far enough away from the body of their foe, Sesshoumaru touched down into the snow and released the miko, who stumbled a little as she stepped away from him.

With satisfaction, he whipped Toukijin out and down, sending the blood flying off into the cold dunes before ruefully driving it down into the snow to finish the job. The snow hissed at the heat, and he backed away, lifting the blade up and settling it into its proper place at his hip. He ran a hand through his hair.

He glanced over at Kagome, who had not moved.

Sesshoumaru inclined his head. "If you have recovered?" he said graciously, smiling a little at his mood. Decapitating things always put him in a good frame of mind, and he rocked a little on his heels as he waited for the miko to say something.

Silently, she just stood there.

After a moment he frowned and opened his mouth to ask again, but he never did as before him she shuddered, dropped the bow, and collapsed into the snow, burying her hands beneath it.

Miserably, Kagome squeezed her eyes shut and wondered what horrible spirit had possessed her to volunteer for human shield duty, and why she hadn't thought about the backs of her fingers, which, when wrapped around the bow, were the only parts of her in front of the pure barrier. Her fingers had sizzled and blistered in the few moments before her powers surged to the front to protect her hands, but the damage had already been done: across the base of each finger the skin had bubbled and broken, and only her determination had kept her grip on the wood sure and strong. Determination, and the knowledge that she would die if she did not hold on.

But now the burns lashed across her hand were weeping and stinging, pulling the skin tight over her knuckles, and she was afraid to look at her hands for fear that her fingers had melted together. It felt like someone was scraping burning granite across the back of her hands, digging into the skin, and so she shoved her hands deeper into the snow, tears of pain trickling down her cheek, down to patter into the icy powder beneath her, as she waited for her hands to grow numb.

I wish I were home, she thought. I wish...

"Kagome?"

She hadn't heard him move, but now he was before her, kneeling in the snow and glaring imperiously. "What is wrong, Kagome?" he demanded. She thought she might have taken issue with his tone, but the sound of her name on his lips, almost concerned, tempered her reaction. Instead of speaking, she mutely lifted

her hands from where they rested in their icy little graves.

For once, she was glad that his face never showed any reaction; he merely stared at her hands as though he were simply reading a book. Swallowing her fear, she looked at her fingers to assess the damage.

It didn't look as bad as it felt, but the first joint of each finger was dark red, limned in broken white skin, swollen and shiny. She was intensely relieved to find that they had not been welded together, but the knowledge did little to dull the pain. Kagome sucked air through her teeth, feeling almost humiliated at the tears that spilled over.

I shouldn't be crying at this. This is nothing compared to what Sango and Miroku and Inuyasha used to deal with. Nothing at all.

Angrily she bent her head to her upper arm, rubbing the wet tracks away before moving forward to bury her hands in the snow again.

She heard the strained sound of fabric ripping, and she looked up to see Sesshoumaru methodically tearing a strip from the billowing sleeve of his kimono. There was no expression on his face.

"What - ?" she started.

"Hold still," he ordered, reaching down and lifting her left hand from the snow before he began to wrap the silk strip loosely around each finger, pausing between each to rip and tie the makeshift bandage in place.

She watched, speechless, as he tended her wounds, and it struck her as strange. She was always the one who tended to everybody else, the one who healed other people's hurts; it seemed bizarre to be on the receiving end. Kagome looked down and watched as he worked, movements sharp and efficient, jaw set, and his hands on hers were warm. She shivered as he plucked her other hand out of the snow, and it was not entirely caused by cold.

He finished and let go of her hands. "We will have to change the bandages at least once a day," he said brusquely.

She wanted to ask how he knew that, but held her tongue. What did it matter where he learned these things? She pressed her lips together in a thin line. "I'm sorry," she said, staring down at the snow where it was slowly seeping into her hakama. She was so cold. Carefully she lifted her injured hands to her upper arms and hugged herself. After a moment, when he didn't move, she looked up.

He was staring at her strangely.

"What?" she asked, uncomfortable.

Sesshoumaru shook his head, very slightly. "Why do you feel the need to apologize?" he asked.

Kagome pursed her lips; she wasn't entirely certain herself. "Because... you won't have any sleeves by the time we get back to Edo?" she ventured.

She saw his lips twitch. "Then the world will simply have the great privilege of seeing my arms," he told her.

And suddenly it all seemed so absurd. The well, the fairytale, the journey, the dragon, the youkai lord joking with her in the snow, and Kagome began to laugh, helpless, giddy, loud.

Sesshoumaru watched as she dissolved into laughter, pressing her forearms to her mouth, trying to stifle her desperately amused chuckles, and felt strangely gratified. He let her have her amusement for a moment before standing up and offering a hand to help her to her feet. Still giggling, she lifted a hand and he grasped her forearm, pulling her out of the snow.

On shaky legs she bent and picked up her bow - the damp would probably warp it, but with luck she wouldn't need it again - and slung it over her back with stiff fingers before turning, still smiling, to Sesshoumaru, who watched her in the dimming light.

The light. "Oh - " she said suddenly, looking to the sky. "It's getting dark."

She watched as he lifted his head as well. "Yes," he agreed before returning his eyes to her and stepping closer.

They said nothing, merely held each other's eyes, companionable, the shared knowledge of their triumph filling the air between them.

In the breeze, his silver hair swelled and ebbed. She thought he looked beautifully alien before her in the fading day, in the freezing snow, and for some strange reason, in a way she couldn't describe, Kagome ached.

She opened her mouth. "Um - " she began, uncertain as to what she was about to say.

Sadly, he was destined to never find out, for she got no further because someone chose that moment to begin shouting.

"OH!" a high, feminine voice shrieked, and both of them turned, startled out of whatever odd world they had been inhabiting, to see a fairly young female wolf youkai adorned in thick white fur, with her hands pressed to her face in the perfect caricature of horror. "You killed Aiko!" she exclaimed. "How could you?"

Kagome blinked. A number of things came to her mind, but only one made it out.

"You named the dragon Aiko?" she said incredulously. Next to her, she heard Sesshoumaru laugh.

The youkai didn't seem to be listening. "How could you?" she wailed again. "I raised her from a hatchling! She was the best dragon I've ever had! How could you?"

"I assure you that it was not without difficulty," Sesshoumaru informed her.

The youkai did not take kindly to this. "You!" she shrieked, pointing a shaking finger at him. "You are not a wolf! And you - " her accusing finger swinging toward Kagome, " - are not pregnant."

"Er," Kagome said. "No?"

"What are you doing here? Do you have any idea how hard it is to train a dragon? Now I have to start all over, and I simply hate training dragons! Dammit!" The youkai stomped her foot in the snow like a petulant child and scowled mightily, her lower lip beginning to tremble. "You killed her for nothing!" she declared.

Kagome was vaguely horrified. "No!" she exclaimed holding a hand out in a placating gesture. "We didn't, we're here for the herbs needed for wolf hanyou!"

"But neither of you are wolves!"

"There were complications," Sesshoumaru cut in blandly. "We are here in lieu of the... father."

"And why isn't he here?" she demanded, clearly reluctant to believe them.

Sesshoumaru sniffed. "He - "

"He died," Kagome cut in quickly. Crossing her mind was the worrying notion that the youkai would be so put out that her dragon was now denogginized by two people who clearly had nothing to do with wolf hanyous that she would not cooperate. The most sympathetic situation she could think of would be a dead father, unable to care for his lover and child due to being stiff as a board and six feet under. We're just kind passers-by! she chirped telepathically. Wouldn't it be nice to give us a break?

Shooting her a startled look, Sesshoumaru almost corrected her, but thought better of it. He was mildly impressed; she was sharp and fearless, and he suddenly found that he was curious as to how she would handle this challenge. He wanted to watch her. Closing his mouth he turned back to the youkai, who had crossed her arms and was now sniffling mightily, as if controlling her tears. She was quiet for a long moment.

"Oh, very well," she said finally, looking them up and down again. "If you're here for a legitimate reason - and you had better be - I suppose you should come with me."

Sesshoumaru almost asked why anyone would travel all this way and risk getting their skin melted off for a remedy they could not use, but the wolf had already turned smartly on her heels and began to stalk away, following the trench of tracks she had left when she had ventured out to confront them. Sliding a glance toward Kagome, he saw that she mirrored his dubious look. She held his eyes for a moment before shrugging and slogging off after their reluctant hostess. He followed after her.

. . .

Thirty minutes later, Kagome found herself with two baby wolf cubs bouncing in her lap and staring wide-eyed as the youkai who had greeted them whipped up kimono after kimono for her inspection. Her name had turned out to be Rei.

"And don't call me Rei-san or Rei-sama," she had commanded. "Rei is fine. Honorifics make me gag."

"Okay," Kagome, who almost never called anyone -san or -sama, agreed. Now she sat next to a very hot fire in what appeared to be Rei's little network of well-lit, well-warmed, well-ventilated caves and watched as Rei whipped heavy, dry clothes out of a small cubbyhole in the rock. She had apparently decided that Kagome, aside from needing to avoid hypothermia, also needed to look nice for 'her youkai.'

"He's not my - " Kagome had begun, but Rei had cut her off.

"I know, but let me pretend," she demanded. "It's so rare that I find female company, and I never wear these. Just let me dress you up a little."

It was obvious she was used to having her way, so Kagome had acquiesced for the sake of a quiet life, or, at least, a quieter life than she had recently been living.

"This one?" Rei asked, holding up a particularly pretty blue kimono that looked warm.

Kagome, who had in fact nodded at each kimono presented to her, nodded again,

somewhat desperate. Perhaps this is the real trial by fire, she thought, slightly panicky as she gently disengaged a little clawed hand from a stray lock of her hair. If it is, Sesshoumaru got the better end of the deal, that jerk. Upon entering the caves, a youkai who could have only been Rei's husband had stood up and greeted them jovially, clapping Kagome on the back so hard she'd stumbled forward a little, though some instinct of self-preservation had caused him to refrain from doing the same to Sesshoumaru. Instead, he'd invited Sesshoumaru to partake of a jug of what Kagome hoped was sake, but, judging from his high color, was most likely something much stronger. She'd glanced back at Sesshoumaru as Rei led her away to change clothes and dry off, but he'd merely shrugged at her before she saw him settle next to the fire and hold out one striped hand to take the jug from the wolf, who passed it over, clearly joyful to have found a drinking partner.

Rei was looking at the blue kimono speculatively. "You know," she said at last, "I think this will suit you. Here." She tossed it and Kagome barely had time to catch it before it sailed into the fire. She gathered the fabric to her as Rei tossed a pair of black tabi over her shoulder - they bounced off Kagome's knee - and began to fold the rest of the clothes.

"Um," Kagome said, staring down at the sturdy fabric.

"Yes?" Rei asked, briskly folding.

"Does it get lonely up here?" she asked. In her lap one of the cubs clapped its hands and began to pet the kimono, rather stickily.

"Oh yes," Rei replied, "but I have Haru, and anyway, there are several medicine women, so we trade off every couple of years."

Kagome blinked. "Really?"

"Of course. Anyone would go completely mad if they had to stay here their entire life. I suppose I should be glad you showed up, since I have half a year to go, but I do so hate training dragons," she sighed. "They really are quite troublesome."

"I can imagine," Kagome said with as much sympathy as she could muster.

"Well," Rei amended, "it's not all bad. I do enjoy the cultivation, and it's not as hard to find food up here as one might think. It's a fairly good life I suppose, so I should stop complaining. Kira! Ryuji!"

The cubs in Kagome's lap looked up expectantly as their mother clapped her hands with authority. "Here, darlings. Let the nice miko change her clothes."

Kagome concealed her small sigh of relief as the children clambered out of her lap and bounded toward Rei, who bent to pick them up. "Do you remember the way back to the first room?" she asked Kagome.

"Er," Kagome said, "I think so."

"Good," she replied. "Join us when you've finished dressing." With that, she swept out, leaving Kagome alone for the first time in three weeks.

The sudden silence, broken only by the lovely crackling of the fire, was like music.

For a long moment, Kagome stood very still and closed her eyes, enjoying the sensation of quiet before she sat down on a thick fur and began to remove her clothes. She peeled off her soaking tabi with her stiff fingers and stuck her feet next to the fire to warm as she shrugged out of her thick top. She was excruciatingly grateful that her bra and panties had escaped the freezing snow mostly unscathed. With little ceremony she stripped her hakama off and laid her clothes next to the fire to dry out before slipping into the kimono and tying the elaborate knot. She untied her hair and shook it out before deciding that it was dry enough and retying it with some difficulty. Her feet were still cold, but, she reasoned, the thick tabi would definitely warm them, so she pulled them on before gathering her shoes and slipping them over her feet. She lingered by the quiet fire a moment longer before rising and padding to the door by which she had entered, and followed the sound of loud laughter and childish giggles.

When she found the first chamber Kagome found Haru bouncing both children on his knees and informing Sesshoumaru that children were, indeed, the greatest thing since bloodshed, and telling the youkai lord that he should certainly get some of his own.

Sesshoumaru merely nodded politely before taking another pull from the jug. Kagome hoped he wasn't getting drunk. Can daiyoukai get drunk? she wondered absently as she walked toward the fire.

"Ah, Kagome, come sit, come sit!" Rei exclaimed. "We have to get this pesky bargaining out of the way before we can relax and go to bed."

Kagome was mildly dismayed. "The bargaining? Now?"

"Well, when would you rather do it?" Rei asked. "Because I can't hand over the herbs unless you pay a price."

"What kind of price?" she asked.

"That's what we were going to figure out," Rei announced. "Don't worry, it won't be terribly burdensome. In fact, I believe we will be finished almost as soon as we have begun."

The tickle of anxiety in her stomach rose a little in intensity - or maybe she was just hungry - but Kagome set her jaw and walked toward them, taking a seat next to Sesshoumaru. "All right," she said, and she was happy to find her voice confident, "let's begin."

Rei clapped her hands. "Excellent!" she exclaimed. "You'll like this. The price is body-removal."

Kagome blinked rapidly as she tried to figure this out. "Oh," she said finally. "You mean of the dragon, right?"

"Of course! Whose body do you think I was referring to? Yours? Ha ha!"

"Ha ha," Kagome replied. She heard Sesshoumaru snicker, and she shot him a sideways glare before returning her attention to their hostess. "But, er, the body is really big. I'm not sure we can - "

Rei cut her off with a curt slice of the hand. "Big! Pfft!" she exclaimed. "Are you or

are you not a miko?"

She frowned before realization dawned. "Oh," she said again. "I'd just have to purify it, right?"

"Exactly. I'm sure it won't take you very long. You can do it tomorrow morning as I prepare the medicine you need."

This did not sound very taxing at all. "Do you give everyone who comes to gather herbs such an easy task?" Kagome asked dubiously.

"No," Rei replied. "I give them the same task. Getting rid of a giant body is so much work, and really, it's their fault it's blocking my valley in the first place. They're usually up to it."

"Oh."

"Ah!" their hostess exclaimed. "I nearly forgot! I need to give you that salve for your fingers."

Kagome glanced down, surprised. "You have a salve for dragon burns?" she asked.

"Of course! Why do you think I hate training dragons so much? Come on darlings! Time for bed!"

Kagome watched as Rei popped up and scooped her children from her husband's lap. "You, too, darling," she said. "Bedtime." Kagome watched as she planted a swift kiss on his upturned face before turning and bustling out. Haru stood slowly and stretched before giving into a yawn.

"Sleep well," he told his guests before sauntering after his wife, and Kagome and Sesshoumaru were alone again.

"Well," Kagome said after a moment, "that was rather anti-climactic."

"Indeed," Sesshoumaru replied, and she was mildly relieved to hear his voice strong and unslurred. "But that is probably for the best."

"I mean, there wasn't even any haggling," she said. "I'm shocked."

"I suspect," Sesshoumaru said, "that getting past the dragon is test enough. Our hostess does not seem to be overly sadistic."

Kagome frowned. "Hey," she said, "why didn't you do the negotiating? I thought this was your task?"

Sesshoumaru shrugged. "I wanted to see how you would handle it," he said cryptically.

For a moment, she thought about being mad at him for throwing her into the water to see if she could swim, but she didn't think she had the energy, and really, it depended on how she looked at it. She turned to him and grinned.

He glanced at her and moved back slightly. "What are you smiling at?" he asked warily.

"Sesshoumaru, does this mean you trust me?" she asked. "Because if so, that's so sweet!"

He frowned at her. "I will have you know that I have never been sweet in my life. I merely do not distrust you."

"That's practically the same thing," she told him.

"It is not," he said. "And it is not sweet," he said again, and she could tell he didn't know whether to be insulted or complimented.

"Oh, whatever," she said airily. "I'm just glad all I have to do is a bit of the laying-on of hands, and then we're out of here."

"For another journey through the cold."

"Oh, thanks for ruining it for me."

"I am simply being realistic; you should not become overly excited."

"But I don't want to be realistic. Aren't we done yet?"

"Not until you submit payment."

"So we're practically done."

"I think," Sesshoumaru said slowly, "that you are not entirely familiar with the meaning of the word 'practically.' Many things can go wrong between now and then."

Kagome bit her lip. "Like what?" she asked him.

He shrugged, and she heard silk on silk. He was dry again. "Were I able to predict such things, I would be capable of avoiding them," he told her.

"Oh," she said before turning back to the fire as Rei bustled in again.

"Here we are!" she sang. "Just put a bit of this salve on your hands and bandage your fingers loosely - and individually - and you should be completely healed by the time you wake up tomorrow." She plunked a small jar down in between them. "There are furs in the corner for sleeping, and I will see you in the morning!"

Without waiting for an answer, she swept out again.

Kagome blinked and gave up trying to keep the same pace as the rest of the world. She looked down at the little jar dubiously before lifting it and unscrewing the top, taking an experimental whiff. "Hmm," she said as a slightly sharp, minty smell hit her nose. "I wonder what's in this."

She heard a ripping sound and she looked up to see Sesshoumaru carefully shredding the cuff of his other sleeve. "It is probably best not to speculate about that," he told her. "It will only distress you."

"Um," she said. "I don't know about that. I have a really good imagination and there aren't any puppies in this, are there?"

He looked puzzled as he took her hands in his and plucked away the bandages that covered them. "Not that I can tell," he said after a moment. "And I doubt that puppies hold any medicinal value. Put it on."

Shrugging, she stuck a fingertip in the salve. It tingled where it met her skin, and she squirmed a little as she smeared it over the base of her fingers, covering the burns. Her skin cooled almost immediately, and her hands suddenly didn't feel as swollen. "Wow," she said. "This stuff feels great."

Sesshoumaru did not reply, merely lifted her right hand to the air as he bandaged it first before moving to the left. She looked at him in the firelight, noting how his color turned from cold to warm with the orange light gilding his hair gold, and turning his gold eyes a burnished copper. He was concentrating on her hands, and she watched as one long lock of hair slipped over his shoulder and into his lap. Kagome had to suppress the urge to tuck it back behind his ear, and resigned herself to watching him.

When he was finished he sat back. "Do not move," he commanded, rising. She gazed after him as he moved to the back corner of the chamber before returning with an armful of furs.

"I never thought I'd get sick of fur," she said ruefully as he let them fall at his feet. He said nothing, simply moved the few feet to the wall of the chamber and sat, leaning against it in his customary sleeping posture, as Kagome rearranged the pile of skins into something resembling a bed. She felt the loss of her sleeping bag keenly.

After she had moved everything to her satisfaction she lifted the top layer and slid under, closing her eyes, grateful to finally be warm before remembering something and opening them again.

"You never told me what I smelled like," she said in the quiet of the chamber. She looked at Sesshoumaru, who sat only a few feet away from her, further into the darkness. He didn't move.

"Did I not?" he asked quietly. She thought he sounded amused.

"You didn't. Though if I smell like wet fur when I purify, I'd rather not know."

"It is different than that," he said. "You do not smell like any scent that you can detect."

She frowned. "What do you mean?"

He shrugged. "Inuyasha smelled like purple on green," he told her after a second's contemplation. "That is the best way to describe it."

"I don't know what purple and green smell like."

"It is the most accurate description, though the combination of purple and green is not a pleasant one."

"Oh," she said. Against her cheek the soft fur tickled her lips as she burrowed a little deeper into her blankets. "Do I want to know what I smell like?" she asked him, suddenly nervous for reasons she did not entirely understand.

For a long moment he said nothing. Then he opened his mouth.

"Waterfalls," he told her. "You smell like sunlight on waterfalls."

He fell silent. For some irrational reason, Kagome thought she might cry.

He was still for another long moment before he stirred again. "You should get some rest," he said quietly. "We depart again tomorrow."

Kagome almost complied, but paused. "Thunderstorms," she said instead. She saw him lift his head, open his golden eyes, and stare at his feet.

Kagome licked her lips. "You smell like thunderstorms to me."

In the flickering orange light, she thought she saw him smile, before he closed his eyes again, letting his head droop a little, obscuring his face from her with his gilded hair. "Sleep, Kagome," he said, voice so quiet she thought it might be light

enough to float.

She smiled. "Good night, Sesshoumaru," she replied softly before turning over and closing her eyes. She was asleep almost immediately.

Tales from the House of the Moon
by
Resmiranda

Chapter Twenty

"They served haggis at the last dinner I attended. I didn't know whether to kick it or eat it. Having eaten it, I wished I'd have kicked it."
-Steve Turner

. . .

Sesshoumaru stood in his bloody, stinking borrowed clothes, and watched as Kagome picked dragon intestines out of her hair. Very quietly he reflected that he should have seen this coming, as the day had begun rather inauspiciously when he gained consciousness. He wished he had taken the hint and refused to move instead of giving in and waking up.

When he had surfaced in the world of the waking, there had been a curious weight in his lap that hadn't been there the night before. It was self-contained,

and situated entirely on his armor.

Without stirring or otherwise indicating that he was awake, Sesshoumaru puzzled for a moment. Breakfast, he thought for no particular reason.

Tiny hands found their way to his chest, pressing down lightly.

Midget, he thought. For a moment he contemplated the various reasons why he would have a midget in his lap, but ceased this exploration when his hazy musings grew a little too sharp. He gave a mental sigh. Midget. Which, he thought, slightly hopeful, might not be entirely incongruous with breakfast.

He could feel someone staring at him, drawing closer, and there, there, he smelled something not unlike rancid meat and animal corpses left in puddles for several days, and he began to reconsider the value of mental exercises.

Zombie midget? he wondered, then gave up. Sesshoumaru opened his eyes.

A very sticky wolf child was standing on his lap, leaning against his chest, and inspecting his down-turned face far more closely than he was entirely comfortable with. He watched as the child's mouth slowly spread into an enormous, toothy grin. It giggled madly before toppling gently backwards onto Sesshoumaru's legs and squealing with a delight that seemed, to Sesshoumaru, completely inappropriate to the given circumstances.

"Eeeeeeeeee!" it announced.

"Gnuh," Sesshoumaru replied, not entirely certain anyone deserved this sort of treatment upon entering the world of the waking. He shifted slightly, causing the

delirious child to tip to his right, soft skull perilously close to the stone floor. With resignation, he caught it before it could go any further, grasping it beneath its arms and lifting it into a sitting position on his lap. The little wolf seemed to think this was the best thing to happen in its short life - possibly even better than excreting, which, to judge from the undertones of its scent, it had done quite recently - and pitched its voice into a higher, more piercing register.

"EEEEEEEeeeeeeeeeEEEEEEEEeeeeeeeeEEEEE!" it declared joyously to the world, and began to bounce where it sat.

Sesshoumaru stared at it, and tried to decide what to do.

He was still contemplating the many ways he might silence the squealing, bouncing cub when a footstep caused him to glance up, only to see Kagome, grinning nearly as toothily as the child in his lap.

"I see you made a friend," she said. Darkly, Sesshoumaru thought she was being a tad too flippant about the situation for someone who routinely compared waking to torture, though in truth it always felt more like torture for him to listen to her go on about it. Still, he thought he might, perhaps, endure her complaints with better humor next time, as he was currently considering death as a viable option. The dead, after all, were able to sleep all the time. How he envied them all in this moment.

Oblivious to his vaguely morbid musings, Kagome plopped down next to him, still grinning. "I'm impressed. I don't think I'd be able to take this nearly as well as you are. How are you doing it?" she asked cheerfully.

He blinked, uncomprehending, mind fuzzy at the edges. "Doing what?"

"Not exploding in rage."

He tilted his head to the side as he considered this. "Through deep meditation," he said after a few seconds' contemplation. It was partially true - his mind was fairly blank at the moment.

She laughed as she took the baby from his hands. It didn't seem to mind the transfer, and blew little bubbles at her as she helped it stand on two feet. Sesshoumaru watched her play with it, still half-dreaming in the darker spaces of his mind.

To his still sleep-drugged eyes, she looked almost matronly, almost childlike herself. She looked pure and sweet, the strange half-light of the cave darkening her form, painting her in inky shadows and unmarked parchment, and her still-bandaged hands against the baby's tender flesh were soft and smooth and strong. Strangely, for some reason, he suddenly remembered that she was human, and those hands, floating like pale wings beneath the baby's own, were so fragile that even this infant could break them, if it thought to do so.

Carefully, suddenly bizarrely mindful of how breakable she was, he reached out and separated them, parting their hands, tipping the child onto its rump and holding the miko's still bandaged fingers in his own. He heard her sharp intake of breath, as if in surprise, or perhaps in pain. He wondered if he held her too tightly.

Now sitting on the cold cave floor, the baby began to wail.

From somewhere else in the chamber, he heard its mother coo. "Oooooh," Rei said, and Sesshoumaru frowned, turning his eyes to watch her bustle around the flames to snatch it up from the floor, "Ryuji, don't bother people when they're sleeping! You know better than that!" She took the baby in her arms, barely casting an apology over her shoulder as she hastened away, back to whatever

chore she had been tending to, and Sesshoumaru heard the medicine woman's husband - Haru, his mind supplied - give a laugh far too hearty for someone who had drank so much last night.

He blinked and turned back to Kagome.

Her hands were still captured in his own, and she was staring at him. He gazed back, wondering why she wasn't pulling away, or, for that matter, why he was not either. Perhaps he should.

Before him, Kagome seemed to catch her breath.

"Wow," she said finally. "You're weird in the mornings. I'm glad you always wake up before I do."

Kagome watched as his face melted into a thunderous scowl before his customary arrogant expression slid smoothly into place. She giggled, which seemed to make him even more peevish. His hand around hers tightened. "I am not weird," he said haughtily. "I am merely looking out for your best interests."

There was a dizzying moment of deja vu. "Oh god," she said despairingly, "don't say that. You sound like my mother, and I thought I left her a few hundred years in the future."

He gave a long-suffering sigh which endeavored to suggest that, in all his incredibly long life, he had never engaged in any activity nearly so trying as speaking to her. Behind her breast, she felt a small but intense twinge of satisfaction.

"I am," Sesshoumaru said with as much dignity as he could muster, "only concerned that your injuries will be exacerbated."

Kagome felt warm. "You're concerned about me?" she asked.

He made a strangled noise in his throat and adjusted his grip on her fingers, refusing to answer. Instead, he pulled her right hand toward him, deftly removing the bandage that circled her index finger.

She'd awoken that morning earlier than normal - even Sesshoumaru had not yet stirred from his spot - and stared sleepily at the low warmth of the fire in front of her, the once raging heartbeat of the flame now fluttering faintly beneath the embers. She had dreamed of... something strange, but now she couldn't remember it clearly. It had been a dark and warm dream, with soft corners and the scent of purple, or what she thought purple might smell like - though it was not something she could ever know - and now that she was awake she wished only to drift back into it. The previous day was floating beneath the pink dust of the dreams that had fled, and she remembered that she did not want it to be the first thing she remembered in the morning. Involuntarily, her fingers twitched, and the stiffness in them drew her further out.

I burned my fingers, she thought. Rei said they would be healed by now, and I don't want to look and see if she's wrong. The cold anxiety that had crept into her bed, around which she had curled all night, made itself felt in the hollow of her throat, and in the half-conscious world between sleep and waking she thought the skin there might split and gape if she made the wrong move. She still remembered that the blade of dread could cut as deep as the blade of memory.

Struggling to push it aside without catching herself on the sharp edge, Kagome tried to sink down and down again into sleep, but exertion and effort defeated her, as though she were trying to escape from quicksand in reverse.

She gave in and sat up, wiping the sleep from her eyes with the back of her sleeve before untying the ribbon that had loosened as she shifted in slumber. Gingerly she crooked her stiff fingers and ran her hands through her messy hair and tried not to think about how difficult it was to do this simple action. She decided to leave it down, and wound the ribbon around her hand before setting it aside and glancing around at her morning surroundings.

The air in the chamber was cool but not cold, and the borrowed kimono was thick enough to keep her warm, but at the moment, even if she were to die of hypothermia, Kagome fervently wished to strip herself of her clothes and the furs across her legs and take a bath. Absently, she scratched her itchy scalp and yawned.

A soft footfall behind her made her turn to find Rei standing a few feet away and smiling. "Good morning," she said quietly. "I was wondering when you would wake up."

Kagome frowned. "Is it late?" she asked.

Rei shrugged. "That depends on how early you usually rise."

"Dawn," Kagome told her, the memory of many days shaken into consciousness by the clearing of a throat giving her voice a rueful cast.

"Well, not terribly late, then. I was just wondering if you wanted some breakfast. It's rabbit."

'Rabbit' turned out to be just that - rabbit, raw, and still with bits of snow-white fur clinging to its sad, bedraggled carcass. The little wolf cubs next to her were

tearing off bite-sized pieces before sticking them in their bloody mouths and sucking on them with relish.

Kagome could almost hear her mother's voice echoing in her head. Kagome, she would say, it is never polite to gag on food that is served to you in someone's home. Smile, eat as little as possible, and compliment your hostess. She watched as the little female cub tore a small chunk away from the flank and offered it to her with a wide, red smile.

It's just raspberry jam, it's just raspberry jam, Kagome thought desperately. And those little bits stuck in between her teeth are pips. Oh, I really hate seeds. Because that's what they are. Seeds. Not, in any way, shape, or form, raw bloody meat crawling with botulism and I wish I had some alcohol because maybe that would kill the worm eggs that are no doubt hiding in there somewhere I think I'm going to be sick.

If only being sick weren't so damn impolite.

Kagome took a deep breath and extended a hand so reluctant she thought she might be forced to pull it forward with her other hand, and took the meat from the chubby, bloody fingers. It felt like... well, like raw meat. Cold and slightly squishy, yet firm and wet. The two children were staring at her, as though waiting for her to perform a trick. Before her throat could close, Kagome popped the meat in her mouth and began to chew.

She had been hoping to chew it quickly and swallow as soon as possible, but it turned out that raw rabbit was as chewier than rice cakes and, as an added bonus, full of blood. It took only an eternity to mash it up enough to swallow, and when she did, she found she wasn't nearly as hungry as she had been when she had awoken.

"Good, eh?" Rei said cheerfully.

Desperately Kagome cast about. "Filling," she said finally. If Rei suspected any falsehood on her part, she made no sign of it, merely grinned her own crimson grin, and Kagome decided that as soon as she was home, she was going to become a vegetarian. Radishes, at least, did not squeeze blood down her throat, and had never been cute, ever.

She managed to force two more chunks down her throat before her stomach rebelled and she sat back, wishing fervently for a glass of water and some rice. She stared at the tiny ridges and chips that made up the uneven floor, and felt, abruptly, cut adrift, as if she had followed a tiny mountain brook on a lazy spring day, and was now surprised to be floating aimlessly in an autumn sea she had never meant to find. For a moment she was mesmerized by the blood on her fingertips.

"Are you feeling well?"

Startled, Kagome glanced up to see Rei looking at her with concern, and she swallowed the bile gathered in her gullet before smiling, smoothing over the loneliness. "I'm fine, Rei. Thanks for your concern. I was just..." She trailed off, wondering if there was any hope for a hot bath at all.

"Just...?" Rei prompted kindly.

Why can't you just be a little annoying, or cruel, or something, so I don't feel so badly about being unhappy? Kagome thought, slightly miserably. "Um," she said, her hesitation caught in her shoulders, "there's... there aren't... um, I think I need a bath." Her cheeks flared a little.

The wolf pursed her lips, tilting her head to the side. "Well," she said after a moment's contemplation, "there's snow outside."

Kagome groaned inwardly. "That's what I thought," she said, and she couldn't keep the frown from her face. Rubbing snow all over her body seemed like an invitation to pneumonia, and would make her cold to boot. "You wouldn't happen to have any pots or anything? To hold snow in so it could melt?"

Rei appeared to think before she clapped her hands. "Of course!" she cried. "There's always the stream! That's where we get our drinking water. It's cold though."

Kagome thought she could handle that. "No! That's fine! Where is it?"

She watched as the other woman's brow furrowed. "Are you sure you want to bathe before you get all mucky with dragon blood?"

Why, Kagome despaired, does this not sound like what I signed on for? Just like every damn thing that's happened since I jumped down that well? But what she said out loud was, "What? I thought all I had to do was purify the corpse!"

"Well, yes, but you have to get to it in order to do so," Rei said cheerfully. "And your companion made quite a mess of it."

Of course. Kagome sighed. "I suppose I will wait, then."

Rei smiled, sharp teeth queer in her nearly human face. "That's probably best, dear. Now, would you please watch the children as I tidy up? They're always under foot."

This was how Kagome found herself chasing after two rambunctious children who managed to be both sticky and wet at the same time, and who thought everything was a toy, especially each other's tails; she was almost gratified when Haru sauntered inside and shook the snow from himself.

"Eh?" he said looking at Kagome, whose hair was sticking out and who was propping his progeny on her hips, before bursting into laughter.

"Are they a pain in the ass today?" he asked, grinning as he extended his hands to take the little girl from her.

"They're... excitable," she told him, gratefully passing one of her charges off to someone with slightly more experience, and who had to love it by order of the universe. Haru had laughed again and swung the little girl around over his head.

"Do you have any yourself?" he asked her as the little girl gave a squeal of delight.

"Er," Kagome said, "not yet, no."

"You should, you should!" he told her, rubbing his daughter's nose against his own.

"Eventually," she'd replied. "I think I'm just happy, uh, borrowing them right now."

She wished, very vaguely, that the children were just a little older, and understood commands like, sit still, and, don't eat that, and, fire bad! She'd set

the little boy down for one second as she hastily pulled her hair back into its customary low ponytail, and when she'd turned around again he had clambered into Sesshoumaru's lap and had become the gleeful recipient of the youkai's puzzled stare. Kagome had taken the moment of respite offered by the assault on her companion before she smiled and wandered over to rescue him.

Apparently Sesshoumaru was really intense in the mornings, and even more taciturn than usual. When he'd grabbed her hands she had hissed in surprise; she was unused to his touch, and to have him catch her fingers with such familiarity was, quite simply, odd, though not at all unpleasant. Neither of them seemed inclined to break the contact, and Kagome was surprised that it felt both natural and slightly awkward, just like his declaration that he was concerned. When he had told her that, it seemed that the only logical thing to feel was a strange and breathless warmth, the compulsion to return such care. She felt gratified. Clearly, though, he was unused to voicing such things aloud as she had always done with her friends. Now Sesshoumaru was ignoring her question and deftly removing the thing she had managed to forget about with an air that was almost, but not quite, clinical. The worry that had settled in the corners of her mind like dust stirred.

"Um, please - " she began, but got no further as he slipped the bandage from her finger and held her hand close to his face for inspection. She bit her lip and held her breath.

"Hmm," was all he said.

It was too much. Kagome tugged on her hand and he released her before she brought it in front of her face for closer examination, heart dropping to her knees.

Her wounds were certainly healed, but instead of the smooth skin she had been hoping for, there was a thin, bubbly film of shiny scar tissue gracing the base of her finger. As she pulled the rest of the bandages off, she saw that each finger had the same faint disfigurement, and there was a lance of disappointment

through her chest, so intense she lost her breath for a moment. Regaining it, she inhaled deeply and flexed her hand, experimentally testing the range of motion.

The skin stretched and pulled, but other than that slight discomfort her fingers appeared to be completely normal in all but appearance. They were entirely functional, just a little uglier.

Which, she thought, emptying her lungs in one long, dejected stream, is better than having ugly fingers that are also useless. That's something, at least. She tucked her lower lip between her teeth and worried it, pressing it between her tongue and upper teeth, as she flexed her hands and watched her new skin smooth and stretch and pull against her movements.

After a few moments Kagome sighed again and let her hands fall to her lap before looking up to see Sesshoumaru staring at her with that look of vague puzzlement that he seemed to wear most often in her presence. It wasn't much different from his normal look, but she found it to be an improvement over boredom, because it meant that he was actually paying attention to her instead of finding her insufferably dull.

Unfortunately he didn't seem to think it was necessary to enlighten her as to the source of his confusion, or perhaps he just enjoyed being confused. After a second she grew slightly uncomfortable gazing back into his inscrutable golden stare, and shifted slightly where she sat.

"What?" she asked him nervously, gaze darting away from his.

She saw him shake his head very slightly from the corner of her eye. "What is wrong?" he asked when she looked at him again, and she noted that his eyes narrowed slightly. She couldn't tell if his change in expression was borne of irritation or concern, or maybe he just needed glasses. He certainly seemed to

narrow his eyes often enough; she was surprised that he hadn't developed a permanent squint.

He was waiting for her answer. Kagome's gaze flickered down to her hands again before she licked her lips. "It's just... the scars," she said. "I was hoping that I wouldn't have them. But," she looked up, pushing a smile across her stiff features, "it doesn't matter. My fingers still work, so there's no real harm done." As if to prove her point, she lifted her hands from her lap and flexed her fingers, wiggling the joints to show him that she was as good as new, save a little wear and tear.

One miko, gently used, she thought, a sardonic chuckle grinding from her throat.

Sesshoumaru quirked an unamused eyebrow and his lips twisted slightly, but he said nothing further on the matter. Instead he stood, long body unfolding in one fluid movement, and shook out his sleeves before running his long, elegant claws through his perfectly ordered hair. Irrationally, Kagome felt annoyed. Didn't he ever need a shower like everyone else in the universe? She scrambled up after him, the push of her newly stiff fingers against the floor of the cave causing a hitch in her chest as she did so.

He melted into his normal stance. "Well," he said, bored again as she bounced - deceptively perky - into a standing position beside him, "are we going to attend to business today, or shall we further discuss my attitudes upon waking?" He sniffed, as though to emphasize his weariness with the world.

The change in mood was so drastic from his vaguely concerned posture before, that Kagome wondered if she hadn't inadvertently hit an on-off switch somewhere. She wasn't even certain what his comment meant, but it was probably safe to assume he was making fun of her. "What?" she spluttered in generic outrage as she took a step back from him, off balance and feeling not a little defensive, though she didn't know why.

Ignoring her angry demand, Sesshoumaru shrugged regally, his chin tilting upwards to indicate he was in Cower, Lowly Peons mode. "I realize that I am a fascinating subject of conversation," he said in conciliatory tones, clearly suggesting that while his graciousness toward his subjects was deep, it would be best for all involved to remember that it was limited as well, "but I suspect that continued exploration of the subject may grow tedious." He gave her a sidelong glance, sighing as he did so.

An angry gasp caught in her throat, and for a second Kagome wanted to slap his pretty face, until she noticed the almost imperceptible twitch of an eyebrow, and she realized he was merely winding her up.

Her disappointment concerning her injuries forgotten, she kicked herself for not realizing that he was teasing her, so instead of committing a poorly-planned and ill-considered attack on his person, she drew back and sniffed theatrically. "I hate to tell you this," she said, and she was secretly pleased that she sounded almost as insufferably snobbish as he did, "but I believe that the subject of you is tedious, regardless of the extent of exploration."

The imperceptibly quirked eyebrow ratcheted up a few notches. "Is that so?" he asked coolly.

She almost smiled. If she hadn't been looking for it, she would have missed the slight, amused quirk of his mouth that sparked in and out of existence so quickly that she would have never seen it if she had blinked. Giving a sigh, she nonchalantly brushed imaginary debris from the front of her kimono as she thought up a suitable rebuttal, finding one at the last moment.

Kagome cleared her throat. "I'm afraid it is," she informed him airily before pivoting smartly on the balls of her feet and marching around the fire, toward the cave entrance. "And as it grows more tedious by the second, I think we should

abandon it altogether and get to work."

For a moment she was worried that she might have pushed it a little too far before he gave one of his humorless chuckles behind her, and she heard the soft fall of his footsteps as he trailed after.

She allowed herself to smile, just a little. If he wanted to shift the subject from her discomfort by annoying her, she decided, then she was actually quite happily inclined to allow him to do so. Besides, that was the best comeback she had invented yet. Still smiling her secret grin, Kagome mentally patted herself on the back for a sharp jab well delivered as she flounced in the direction of the snowy world outside, and the task ahead of them.

Thirty minutes later and Kagome was mounted on Sesshoumaru's back, and he was bounding lightly across the shallow valley in the direction of yesterday's triumph. They would have been on their way long before, but Rei had waylaid them halfway to the door and pressured them into changing clothes. Kagome capitulated easily, and had ended up in old, oversized blue hakama and a navy kimono culled from the dustiest corner of the caves. At least they were warmer. Sesshoumaru, on the other hand, was slightly more difficult, and only after much cajoling had he allowed Rei to convince him that dragon blood stank, and would seep into fabric in no time, and he didn't want to go around smelling like one for the rest of his journey, did he? He donned black hakama - faded - and dark grey kimono - slightly threadbare - before Rei had deemed him acceptable. Kagome was secretly surprised that he had acquiesced to their hostess's wishes with such relative grace, until she remembered that he could be polite if he wanted to be. She was in the middle of heaving a resigned, self-pitying sigh when Rei surprised her by pressing three or four tasuki cords into her hands.

"But - " Kagome had begun, attempting to grab them through thick fabric before shaking the long sleeves of the kimono away from her hands and down around her wrists with frustration.

"No buts!" Rei had interjected imperiously. "How many times have I sent young men off to clean up their own messes?"

After a significant pause, Kagome realized that this was not a rhetorical question. "Um - " she cast about, clueless. "More than a few?"

"More than a few!" Rei grabbed the answer and held it aloft as she would a trophy, metaphorically speaking. "That's exactly right! And who would know more about cleaning dragon innards out of rocky cracks?"

Behind her, Sesshoumaru snickered. "Er," she said, deliberately avoiding his gaze. "You?"

"Exactly, my dear," Rei exclaimed as if she had just proved a point. "So you listen to me and just take these. You won't be sorry that you did!" Kagome gave in, just to get out of there.

Now the icy wind was slipping over her skin and into her clothing. Kagome huddled against Sesshoumaru for warmth, and was glad that he had left his armor behind - the metal could get cold in the frigid air, and she was not keen on revisiting the numbness of yesterday. Not to mention that her fingers were already stiff with cold if not with injury, and she was only barely able to repress the urge to stick her hands down his neck to warm them. Pressing her face against his shoulder, Kagome tried to close around him so she could steal his heat before her nose started to drip in earnest and she would be forced to find something with which to clean it. She closed her eyes, and tried to think of something to talk about to break the silence.

Her mind wandered listlessly. She already felt tired, even though it was probably only about ten in the morning, or a little after. It was probably all the chasing

around after baby wolves, she reasoned. Enough of that would make anyone tired within the span of a quarter hour, and, she realized, it was probably not the most pleasant way to wake up.

"Sorry I let Ryuji wake you up," Kagome said, yawning against his back.

For a moment she thought he hadn't heard her when he turned his head slightly. "Who?" he wanted to know.

Kagome rolled her eyes. "Never mind," she said, exasperated.

Sesshoumaru was not easily dissuaded. "Who?" he asked again.

"The little wolf that woke you up? You know the one," she said, lifting her chin to rest it on his shoulder for better access to his ear. "Small, high voice, really liked your lap for some reason?" she prompted.

"Ah," Sesshoumaru said after a second's pause. "Is that his name?"

"No, I made it up."

She could feel his confusion despite the bored expression on his face. "All right," he said eventually.

Sesshoumaru heard her giggle. "I didn't really," she told him between chuckles. "That really is his name."

It slowly began to dawn on Sesshoumaru that she might be making fun of him, which was not the way the universe was supposed to work. "All right," he said again, just to irritate her.

"Oh, never mind," she grumped.

"All right," he said absently for the third time, glad that she seemed to have decided to abandon her confusing efforts for the time being.

She was quiet for a long few minutes before she spoke again, her voice hesitant, which made him suspicious and slightly anxious. "Sesshoumaru?"

After a moment he realized that she required a response from him to continue, and he entertained the passing fancy that if he did not acknowledge her then she would be silent forever. He found the prospect boring, which was much worse than potentially upsetting. "Yes?" he replied finally, slightly apprehensive. She wasn't the most tactful of people he had met, so if she was nervous about asking something, there was probably a reason.

She didn't respond, and he was about to repeat his answer when she sighed. "Did you - " she began, stuttered, and then started over. "Did you mean what you said? About how I... how I smell?"

The question was perplexing. What would be the point in lying about something like that? "Yes," he ventured, wondering why she would ask.

"Oh," she said and fell silent for a moment, her fingers on his shoulders twitching.

Sesshoumaru gave up trying to follow her chain of thought and turned back to the

path in front of them. They were well within range of the dragon's former nest, and would be there in a few more minutes. The scent of dragon's blood was already curling in his nose, and Sesshoumaru was chagrined to find that Rei had not exaggerated about the stench; it didn't even smell like blood now, but something rank and unappetizing. He sighed with resignation as he made his way across the snow.

"Sesshoumaru?" Kagome said suddenly.

"Yes?"

"What do I smell like now?"

He shrugged. "Like a wolf that needs a wash," he told her.

He felt her jerk in surprise. "What?" she exclaimed. "I do not!"

"I have no reason to lie," he sniffed, "and you most certainly do." This was only mostly true of course. Her own scent was beneath the smell of the wolf den, but it was faint at the moment, especially in her borrowed clothes.

She huffed in his ear, sending his flesh shivering. "Yeah, well, you don't smell that great either," she said petulantly.

"Oh, really?" he said mildly. "Why would I care what you think I smell like?"

There was a pause. "Wait, maybe that isn't you. It kind of smells like... rotten eggs. Do you smell that?"

Sesshoumaru had no idea - he had not smelled rotten eggs very often in his life, but he suspected that she was beginning to catch wind of the dragon's corpse. "I do," he told her.

He listened as she snuffled by his ear, and then buried her face against his back, inhaling mightily, as if she could smell his liver through dint of sheer effort. After a second she lifted her face again. "All right," she announced. "That's not you. Forget I said anything."

Sesshoumaru felt strangely pleased, and he turned his attention to the task at hand.

The rocky incline above them was slippery with ice and snow, and Sesshoumaru fell silent as he navigated his way up and over, avoiding the red trench that had been burned through the snow by the heat of the dragon's blood coursing from its neck. With one final push, he rose into the air over the nest.

"Ew," was Kagome's only comment as he crested the ridge of the valley and she saw the body beneath them.

Despite the cold the corpse was already starting to decompose a little, so the edges of its skin where he had sliced through were already looking ragged, and the inside of a throat is not the prettiest of sights in the first place. Sesshoumaru studiously avoided the severed head, opting to touch down lightly on the twisted curve of the neck. The body shifted slightly beneath his weight, but did not tip them over and off into the bloodstained snow beneath them, for which he was rather grateful.

Sesshoumaru knelt and let his passenger clamber off, though the effort was

hampered by her unwillingness to lower her sleeve from in front of her nose. When her feet were finally as firmly planted on the dragon's skin as possible, he rose, trying to keep his breath as shallow as possible.

"Um," Kagome said from behind the barrier of her hand, "this is probably not the best place to stand, if I'm going to be purifying things. We'll fall."

He hadn't thought of that. Sesshoumaru sighed as he threw her over his shoulder and hopped gracefully down to the outer rim of the nest, only losing his grace when he discovered no good footholds. At the last moment he grabbed the ledge and held on, eyeing the tip of the dragon's tail with suspicion. For some reason, he thought he had seen it move.

Kagome was not having that trouble - she wiggled against his shoulder in an effort to get down. Sesshoumaru sighed again and tipped her into the cradle of his other arm.

"Eep!" she squeaked before she seemed to regain her grasp on the situation. "What the hell?" she demanded. "Warn me before you do that!"

Sesshoumaru shrugged. "I suggest getting to it," he said blandly. "I don't want to hang off the edge of a cliff all day. I might accidentally drop you."

Kagome didn't take the bait, merely rolled her eyes and twisted in his grasp, reaching up to the cold, white scales by her head. He watched as her brows drew down in concentration, and he smelled the bright scent that caused his blood to quicken with anxiety gathering at her edges, gilding her with gold. He waited.

After a while he grew tired of waiting. "Well?" he said after what he felt was a suitable amount of time had passed.

Kagome had been wondering the same thing. The scales against her hands were cold and unyielding, and even though she could feel her power gathering and grounding itself in the flesh beneath her fingers, nothing was happening. She made a noise of frustration in the back of her throat. "I don't know," she said. "I'm zapping it pretty well, but nothing's happening."

She looked back at him to see him raise a brow in disbelief. "Why not?" he asked, clearly unhappy about the alternate solutions for dragon removal. Kagome didn't blame him; she had already begun to think about them, and none of them seemed pleasant.

"I don't know," she said again. She sucked her lower lip into her mouth and bit down, trying to think. She couldn't remember any time that her purification didn't work on monsters; even if they were strong, they always did something, always burned them or cut through their skin, but never had it not worked. Anxiously, Kagome wondered if she had done something wrong, and now her purification would no longer respond to her. The thought was frightening.

"I wish Miroku were here," she said out loud, and suddenly she remembered, guiltily, that she was supposed to look for him and Sango while she was here. She should have asked Kouga if he knew where they were. The loop of sadness in her chest tightened just a little.

"Who?" Sesshoumaru asked, breaking into her small reverie.

Kagome shook her head, as though to shake off her guilt. "The monk," she said sadly. "He would know what was wrong. I've always been able to kill demons and monsters with my powers, so I don't know why they aren't working now. I can feel it, but it's not doing anything."

"Have you never purified a dragon before?"

"That's just it, I have. That one disintegrated just fine when I shot it," she said. "What's different about this one?"

Kagome felt her back shift against his arm as he shrugged. "Perhaps," he ventured slowly, "you can only kill things that are alive?" Then, because that sounded stupid, "Dead flesh need not be purified, maybe?"

Sesshoumaru watched as her face fell rather spectacularly. "Oh, god, I hope you're wrong," she moaned, bringing her hand to her forehead and rubbing her fingertips against the skin there in small, soothing circles.

"Why would you hope that? Is it not better to have your power still than to have lost it?"

Her chest rose and fell in a sigh. "Well, if you put it that way," she said, "I guess I hope you're right. I just don't want to move this thing by hand."

Sesshoumaru knew exactly what she meant. "Still," he said, "it is better than being suddenly defenseless, yes?"

Her lower lip stuck out in a slight pout. "Oh, stop trying to make me look on the bright side," she grumbled. She crossed her arms and proceeded to stare off into space.

After a moment Sesshoumaru cleared his throat, causing her to look up. "If you don't mind," he said dryly, "I would like to relocate before my arm falls off."

"Again?" Kagome teased. He shot her a glare and she grinned back.

"But yeah," she continued, "that sounds like a good ideaaaaaeeeeeeeeeeek!" Her acquiescence was lost as he tightened his grip and pushed off from the mountainside, rising to a handstand before flipping over and landing just inside the rim of the dragon's nest. He flexed life back into his fingers as he set her down in the snow next to him. On his other side, the sinuous tail lay languorously over the edge of the cliff.

Kagome figured that she deserved that, so she didn't bother getting angry. Instead she watched as he straightened while she regained her breath. After a moment they turned back to the corpse next to them.

It was huge, and mostly curled in on itself, like a particularly large snake with arms and clawed fingers, and now that she was close to it Kagome found it difficult to hold it all in her sight at once. She had to tilt her head before its different parts fell into place - a lump high above on the other side of the tail became a hip, a towering peak became a knee. She doubted that even Sesshoumaru, in his true form, could budge it very far while it was still in one piece, and she severely doubted he would want to put it anywhere near his mouth once it was sliced up and its sulphuric-smelling blood was leaking out.

Stupid dragons, she thought. "I guess," she ventured slowly, "that we'll have to cut it up and toss it into the valley."

Sesshoumaru turned and looked at her, slightly surprised. "We?" he said.

Kagome frowned and lifted her chin. "Yes, we. I can't move it all by myself."

"I was not suggesting that. I was expressing surprise that you would wish to assist me."

Kagome felt annoyed. "Why? Do you think I'm too weak to even do this?" she demanded.

The demon shook his head. "No," he said, "I thought you would foist this task off on me, and I would do it alone."

That had not even occurred to her, and now that he had mentioned the idea she felt rather silly for not thinking of it first. Still, she wasn't going to make him do all the work. It wouldn't be fair. "Of course not," she said with as much dignity as she could muster. "I'm not going to leave you to do this all by yourself. Now are you going to get to slicing or what?"

She watched as he turned, bemused, to the tail in front of him and inspected it. It was enormous, the circumference extending to at least twice his height, and for a moment Kagome wondered if he would even be able to cut all the way through it before he lifted his claws and tilted his head, as if calculating. Then he shrugged, and his hand went to Toukijin and removed it from where it rested at his hip, drawing the blade above his head before bringing it down in one sharp movement.

The dragon's tail exploded.

It was a rather spectacular eruption, mostly away from them but, as is the nature of explosions, out as well. And up. Kagome blinked, staring at the spray of dragon chunks against the opposite wall of its nest as a very gentle rain of soft tissue began to fall from the sky.

For a moment neither of them said anything until Sesshoumaru took a step backwards, his silver hair slowly becoming streaked with red, and turned to her, looking slightly dazed.

"Hn," he said finally, as though he were merely an innocent bystander with no vested interest in the events going on around him, "that was not the intended result."

Kagome felt that this was possibly an understatement. "Yeah," she replied as a fairly large bit of dragon landed on her shoulder, "I didn't think so." Together they stared at the mess in front of them, contemplating a future that was looking rather bleak and dirty indeed.

Sesshoumaru tried several dragon slicing techniques, but all of them gave him the same result - airborne filet of dragon, flying dragon liver, dragon pate - so he eventually gave up and trudged miserably through the snow and the stench, slicing haphazardly in the direction of the corpse and walking on as it exploded behind him. There was nowhere to hide from the inevitable shower, so in the end Kagome stayed next to him, marching mutely through the snow by his side in what was possibly misguided solidarity while he went about his repulsive duty.

Neither of them said anything, and Sesshoumaru was at least mildly surprised to find that Kagome refrained from complaining about the mess he was making. She didn't even berate him, for which he was extremely grateful.

It was odd - he had never seen a dragon explode before, so the consequence of his actions were entirely unexpected and extremely unwelcome, but like Kagome he had never had to deal with a dragon that was already dead. All the ones he had met were very much alive - though of course they did not stay that way - and after they had been dispatched he had never stuck around to see what happened next. He suspected that the suddenly volatile properties of the corpse were the

natural outcome of the decomposition process, but in the end it was of no real importance. The only thing that really mattered was that they were both covered in dragon entrails, and were destined to stay that way for the next few hours as they tossed the corpse into the steep valley below.

After a while they reached the head, the last bit needing liquidation. Sesshoumaru sighed and slashed at it, and Kagome watched as the head seemed to expand outward, suddenly sending an explosion of bone and brain into the surrounding air. When it finally settled Sesshoumaru nodded with a grim and resigned satisfaction and turned to her. "Let us get down to business," he said, holding out a hand. It took her a moment to realize that he was waiting for her to hand him a tasuki cord. Mutely she removed one from where they hung at her waist and passed it over. Gripping one end of the cord between his sharp teeth, Sesshoumaru looped it around his shoulders and over his sleeves before tying it into place. Kagome attempted to nonchalantly observe how nice his bare arms looked, but in the end she looked away, slightly embarrassed. He didn't seem to notice, instead testing the bonds. Apparently satisfied, Sesshoumaru then bent at the waist before lifting what had once been the right front quarter of the dragon's face into the air. Kagome tried not to look at the quivering mass of frontal lobe still couched in the skull. "Shall we?" he asked.

"Sure," she replied, suddenly extremely nauseous. She gazed after him as Sesshoumaru leapt away through the gory debris to toss his burden into the valley beyond before letting her shoulders fall as she looked at the slices of meat all around her. Bodies, it seemed, contained quite a bit more than what they appeared to be able to hold. Still, she couldn't let him do this all on his own. Resignedly she separated another tasuki cord from the bunch and roped it around her kimono to secure her sleeves before sticking the others back in her waistband. Stomach roiling, she bent and picked up a bit of dragon with the skin still attached and began to slog toward the steep cliff, trying not to think of the squelching beneath her shoes.

An hour and a half later Kagome stood in what had once been the dragon's stomach and found herself about to burst into frustrated tears. Intellectually she

knew that their job was about half finished, and in another hour and a half they could start back toward a bath, but right now it seemed that she would never escape this hell, would be forever trapped in an endless cycle of tossing stinking bits of carcass over a cliff. Kagome stamped her foot in despair, which turned out to be a miscalculation. Beneath the sole of her shoe, she felt something give and slide, and in slow motion she fell into a pile of small intestine.

At this point Kagome abandoned all pretense of even attempting to be serene about the situation.

"ARG!" she shrieked, not caring that her mouth was now full of foul air, and not caring that Sesshoumaru would hear her. She folded her body, struggling to get her feet beneath her, her fingers sinking into the rubbery guts under her hands. "Arg!" she reiterated as she scrambled to her feet. "This is the worst job ever!"

Behind her she heard Sesshoumaru land in a squishy pile of innards and she turned to see him, covered in blood and looking almost downcast. There was a streak of blood down the side of his face, and the gore on his hands reached almost to his elbows, layered on so thickly she could no longer see the stripes on his wrists. He didn't even look her in the eye, just stared at the ground when he spoke. "I know," he said to her. "I did not anticipate this eventuality."

Kagome tried to wipe her hands off on her hakama, but the gesture was in vain - every inch of her was messy - so she settled for picking bits out of her hair instead. Perhaps if she didn't have stinking pieces of bowel in her hair she would feel a little less repugnant. "It's not your fault," she told him, removing a rubbery bit of intestines and letting it join its brethren at her feet. "It's just... ugh." She wrinkled her nose. "This is just absolutely disgusting."

Sesshoumaru watched her remove bits from her hair, and felt bizarrely unhappy that she had to be subjected to this. He wished, fervently, that he had never awoken that morning.

Kagome waited, but he didn't appear to have a reply for her, and she suspected that he was feeling a bit of a blow to his pride; he was a warrior, not a laborer. This sort of thing was beneath him.

She sighed.

"You know," she said conversationally as she scooped a mass of wiggling intestines into her arms and headed in the direction of the cliff, "I told Kouga that when I got back I would kick him where it hurts. But now I think I'll just kill him."

She heard him shift behind her before his footsteps fell into line with hers. "You would not, perhaps, be desirous of assistance in that endeavor?"

Kagome pretended to think as he drew alongside her, a particularly impressive expanse of rib cage dragging behind him. "It depends," she finally said.

"On what?" he wanted to know.

"On how much it costs." They reached the edge, and Sesshoumaru watched as she heaved the pile in her arms over the side as best she could.

"I believe," he said as he tossed his own armful after hers and watched it tumble down, over and over itself, to rest far below them at the base of the mountain, "that I would be willing to aid you free of charge."

Kagome turned to him. "Oh, you misunderstand me," she said.

The look on his face seemed to say, it wouldn't be the first time, but out loud he simply replied, "Do I?"

"Oh, yes," she sniffed. "It's not how much you would charge me, but how much you'd be willing to pay for the privilege." She grinned. "Something so fun is definitely not free."

For a moment he blinked at her, and then his mouth curved, and he chuckled.

It was the first time she'd ever heard him really laugh, genuinely, without malice or dark amusement.

She thought it sounded nice.

Content to stare up at him and replay his laugh in her head, Kagome didn't move when he lifted a clawed hand and reached toward her, his fingers drifting to rest on her hair, out of her line of sight. Curious, she twisted her head slightly, trying to see what he was doing when he drew back, a lock of her hair following his hand, still molded to the sticky sliver of viscera he was removing. Almost ruefully he separated it from the strands clinging to it before tossing it over the side of the mountain to be lost in the snow before turning back to her.

"Shall we continue?" he asked. "We are almost finished."

Kagome looked over her shoulder at the carnage. "I wouldn't say almost," she said. "I'd say a little over half-way."

He shrugged as he turned away from her. "If you wish," he said. "But almost

means a bath is just that much closer to our reach, whereas half-way means just that much more dragon to remove. I know which one I prefer."

Who would have thought he would be an optimist? she thought, a small smile winding over her lips. Sesshoumaru cast a look back at her.

"Well, miko?" he prompted. "You say we have work to do, and it will not get done with you loitering around." He turned back and lifted one of the enormous clawed feet into the air before lobbing it high over her head to arch down into the valley below. Nodding in satisfaction, he returned to the task at hand, picking his way over the gruesome landscape.

Kagome giggled, and trailed after him.

. . .

Another hour and a half later they trudged back, bloody but satisfied with a job completed. It was only early afternoon, but Kagome thought she might sink down into the snow and sleep for a day, except she wanted to be clean first. Also, sleeping in the snow would probably kill her, but really, that was only incidental. What she really wanted was a bath.

"Well," she said perkily as they neared the caves. "That was rather fun, I thought." She cast a sidelong glance at her companion, just in time to catch the confusion flitting over his features.

"If that is so, then you are employing a definition of fun of which I have previously been unaware," he replied.

Kagome laughed at that, as it was a fabulously pompous way of saying 'what?' "I might as well pretend it was fun," she clarified, "since I just wasted three hours of my life - which I will never get back - doing it. I want it to have been worth it."

Sesshoumaru just shrugged, as though to indicate simply being done with the task was reward enough itself, which, she reflected, it probably was. She smiled and turned back toward their destination.

"So what's on the agenda for the rest of the day?" she asked brightly.

Sesshoumaru frowned and peered at her from the corner of his eye. She was entirely too upbeat for someone who had just spent three hours slogging through a pile of dragon. He opened his mouth to reply, but she began to speculate out loud before he could answer.

"Go back to the caves, get a wash, get some dinner and some sleep, and then head out tomorrow morning?" she said, as though trying the plan out on him.

He arched an eyebrow. "We leave today," he informed her. "I do not wish to linger here longer than necessary."

"Today?" she exclaimed, clearly dismayed. "Why today? I'm exhausted!"

"That may be so," he replied, "but we will extend our journey by at least half a day if we do not leave immediately. Besides," he sniffed, "you will not be carrying another person on your back, although you are certainly welcome to try."

This was very true, and Kagome felt rather petty and mean for complaining about being tired when she wasn't the one who would be lugging her sleepy butt around. "Er," she said, "I think I'll pass on that, though thanks for the offer."

"That is disappointing," he said. "I was looking forward to being the lazy one for a change."

"Hey! I am not lazy," she told him. "I'm just easily tired. There's a difference."

"Of course. One makes you lighter, I suppose?"

"Oooooh," Kagome exclaimed, half caught between amusement and frustration, "No. But one makes me quieter!"

Sesshoumaru cast an interested glance in her direction. "Indeed?" he said.

She grinned at him and nodded. "When I'm tired, I stay quiet. If I were lazy, I'd talk a lot more."

"Gnuh," he replied, obviously disheartened by that prospect.

"Oh, you like my conversation," she teased as they neared the cave. "You don't have to say anything, I can just tell. I am a fascinating individual, and everything I say is a nugget of gold."

He snorted as he swept aside the furs covering the entrance, standing aside to let her go inside. "A nugget of something, to be sure," she heard him mutter. She let that slide as she stepped past him and into the warmth of the front chamber; the

heated air on her icy face and arms almost burned, but it felt so good she didn't care. Kagome stood just inside the door and stamped life back into her feet as she heard Sesshoumaru draw up behind her.

From the other side of the fire there was a rustling before Rei came bustling around it, a look of surprise on her genial features. "Oh my!" she said. "You had to do it by hand didn't you?"

Kagome just nodded. Rei shook her head. "That's unfortunate," she said, sighing. "I was hoping your powers would make short work of it, but it doesn't matter I suppose. Would you like to wash up?"

"Yes," Kagome replied, and she felt a rush of relief as if someone had just lifted a stifling blanket from her face and she could breathe again. She sagged where she stood.

Rei smiled and gestured that they follow her before turning and walking toward the back of the caves and to the left. They trailed after her.

An hour later Kagome - her hair and skin scrubbed free of all gore - huddled in her miko outfit as she sat next to the flickering flames and dried out. She was still suppressing shivers from the icy water when Sesshoumaru emerged from the dark chamber through which the underground stream ran, gleaming a little wetly but once again in his pristine white clothes, and definitely clean. She watched as he ran his claws through his damp hair before he wrung it out on the cave floor. Mournfully he tried to fluff it into a semblance of its former self, but it hung heavily, and finally he sighed as he strolled over to sit next to her, letting it pile in his lap when he lowered himself to the ground.

"Feel better?" she asked. Unfortunately she was trying to rub some life back into her nose when she spoke, so it sounded more like, "beer batter" but

Sesshoumaru pretended not to notice. He just nodded as he slowly combed his fingers through the length of drying hair over his shoulder. Kagome almost offered to help him with it, but decided at the last moment that such a gesture might be a little too forward. Instead, they sat in companionable silence for a while, enjoying the novel feeling of cleanliness, and Kagome closed her eyes to relish the quiet moment.

She started awake when she felt a hand brush her knee, and for a second she was disoriented, thought she was young again, thought she was sitting at a campfire and Sango was shaking her awake - but no. The fingers withdrawing were clawed and the hand was striped, and Kagome blinked rapidly, looking up at Sesshoumaru. "What?" she asked groggily.

"You are dry," he told her, and for some reason, to her sleep-addled mind, she didn't understand what he meant before she remembered that she had bathed. She shifted, trying to move her hair behind her shoulders, but a sharp pain stopped her. Wincing, she lifted a hand and rubbed it over her stiff neck as he continued. "I have the herbs. It is time to go."

"Already?" she asked, a little dismayed. He said nothing, only pressed a small package into her hands before standing and tossing his own dry hair behind him. Kagome watched dumbly as he strode to the side of the cave and began to strap his armor into place.

She looked back at the package in her hands. It seemed so small, so inconsequential. It was strange that they had journeyed all this way, defeated a dragon and removed its corpse - which she would never forget as long as she lived - just for this soft little parcel. It was so small; it could be so easily lost. Her fingers tightening on it, she looked back at Sesshoumaru, who was tying his obi into its elaborate knot, and noticed that they were alone. "Where's Rei?" she asked him.

"Outside," he answered. "I believe she is giving her children a breath of fresh air."

"You mean she got tired of chasing them around the caves?" Kagome asked.

"That as well," he replied, sliding Toukijin and Tenseiga into place at his hip. "Are you ready?"

Nodding, she scrambled to her feet and gathered her bow and her quiver, strapping both to her back before turning away from him and slipping the package into her clothes where it came to rest against her stomach. It felt weird and probably made her look fat, but since her backpack had melted she had no where else to put it. She turned back to face him, hastily tying her hair back and quickly jogging after his already retreating back, following him through the labyrinth of caves.

Kagome felt a pang of disappointment at the loss of the fire when they emerged once again into the frigid air. Sesshoumaru did not seem inclined to say any sort of farewell - she noticed that he never seemed to say hello, either, going and coming when he pleased - but Kagome felt grateful enough to give Rei a hug and plant a kiss on each little wolf pup before they departed.

"Thank you," she said to Rei as she stepped back. "I hope I'll see you again some time."

"That would be nice," Rei agreed, drawing back as well, balancing her babies on her hips. "I wish you a good journey."

Kagome smiled, climbed onto Sesshoumaru's back, and they were off again, into the late afternoon light.

. . .

"We have to stop here?" she asked through chattering teeth. Sesshoumaru gave her a long-suffering glare.

"Unless you wish to continue on," he replied. "Though as the temperature is dropping rapidly, I suggest you get inside. Leave your bow and quiver." He raised his hands to the leather straps holding his armor in place and began to undo them. Kagome silently groaned with despair before bending down and peering into the cave once more. These mountains, she thought, are very poorly designed.

There was room for both of them, but just barely. The low, sloping ceiling and the shallow bowl of the floor hardly qualified this as a cave at all - more a cubbyhole - but she was freezing, and at least she could be warm inside. Sighing, she set her bow and arrows aside before crouching down and crawling inside, wedging herself as best she could into the tight corner in the back. There was barely enough room to stretch her legs out, and the low ceiling sloping downwards seemed to hang heavily above her. She shuddered and closed her eyes, listening to the sounds of chunks of armor hitting a thick blanket of snow outside. Kagome heard a scraping sound, and she peeked from beneath her eyelashes to see Sesshoumaru arranging his swords just inside the entrance before crawling in after her.

It was a tight fit, though it wasn't nearly as awkward as it had been the first night. Kagome thought this might be attributed to their shared ordeal concerning dragon guts. Once you'd seen someone towing a giant bladder behind them, there was little that could embarrass either of you. She didn't even blush as he slid in beside her, his side pressed against hers as he rearranged himself so that he was blocking the opening as he did the first night, though now that they were side by side his body prevented most of the cold air from reaching her.

Kagome shoved her hands inside her sleeves to keep them warm as she settled back in the darkness, bone-tired. They hadn't spoken much during the return trip - Sesshoumaru seemed lost in thought, and she hadn't really had the inclination or the energy to try and draw him out of his shell. Besides, she was comfortable just keeping her face out of the wind and quietly thinking about nothing in particular. They didn't have to talk all the time, after all.

They sat in comfortable silence for a long moment before Kagome cleared her throat. "We'll be back at the wolf's den tomorrow?" she asked.

She felt Sesshoumaru shift beside her. "Yes," he said.

"When do you think we'll get there?"

The silken sound of hair sliding over his shoulder told her he was tilting his head as he calculated. She could almost picture his 'thinking' face in her head: pursed lips, slight frown, faraway look in his eyes, as if he could discern the answer he sought by scaring it out of the nearest object to fall under his stare. After a second he sighed. "Before midday, perhaps," he said. "But we will not stop there."

Kagome frowned. "What about Myouga?"

Sesshoumaru snorted. "Well, perhaps we will pause long enough to collect him, but we should make all due haste. The longer we take, the harder it becomes to deliver the baby."

Bleah, Kagome thought as she ran across a problem in their plan. "How will we find her?" she wondered out loud.

Sesshoumaru shrugged, his shoulder rubbing against hers. "Scent," he said. "Perhaps Kouga will have found her by now. It won't take long, I should think."

Kagome just nodded. They were silent again until a thought struck her. There didn't seem to be any reason to not voice it, so she did. "I think," she said slowly, "that I will miss Rei."

He was quiet for a moment, until he said, "Why?"

She would have looked at him in vague surprise if she could have seen his features in the darkness, but such a gesture seemed futile. "Because she was nice," she replied instead. "I liked her a lot."

"You barely knew her," Sesshoumaru pointed out.

"Well, yeah, but that's the point of meeting new people - you meet them, then you get to know them."

He grunted, neither in agreement nor disagreement.

Kagome smiled faintly. "What, you don't like meeting people?"

"It has its advantages," he conceded, "but it is not terribly enjoyable to me."

"Why not?" she wanted to know. The air in their little nook was beginning to warm, and her eyelids were growing heavy. She could feel her body relaxing into the shape of the stone beneath her, her head tilting to the side as sleep slowly

wound its sinuous tendrils around her and drew her down. Kagome yawned.

She was almost asleep when he finally answered, though he did not answer her as she thought he would.

"You travel through time," he said instead, his voice soft. "You should know why not."

Kagome blinked slowly, suddenly thinking of Sinayo and Amaya and Sango and Miroku and Shippou and Inuyasha - each of them dead or gone somewhere where she could not find them, leaving holes in her that could never be filled by anyone else. "Oh yes," she replied quietly, sadly, "I remember now."

Next to her, he sighed and was still. Slowly, she sank into the darkness of her head.

It was... difficult, she decided. It was very difficult to think that Rei would be gone when she got back to her own time. She had really liked the wolf, had found her almost sisterly. She wondered if the little babies would grow up strong, or if they would die young, or if they would have babies of their own. She wondered if Kouga's grandson would survive, if Akiyama would be there for him like Inuyasha's father was never there for him. So much was uncertain, especially the ending...

She swallowed, and wondered if Sesshoumaru was dead as well in her own time.

For a brief, dizzying moment, she wanted to ask him, if he were still alive, to come and find her when she returned to her own time, but then she stopped, swiftly deciding that she would rather not know his end, if indeed he had ended by the time she was born. Even if she never saw him again, even if it was an illusion, she

wanted to think he was still alive. She wanted to believe that he continued.

The thought carved her out and left her hollow.

But there was no use thinking about that, was there? Slowly, Kagome disentangled a hand from her sleeve and placed it against her heart, as though to chase away the emptiness she suddenly found there before she lowered it again and, impulsively, leaned against the demon next to her and let her head rest on his shoulder.

He was still and made no action to remove her, though she could hear a small sigh escape from him. As she let sleep come up to claim her, she wondered what he was thinking about, if he regretted knowing her. She wondered if she had been worth it for him.

Kagome hoped so.

Tales from the House of the Moon
by
Resmiranda

Chapter Twenty-One

"The life of every man is a diary in which he means to write one story, and writes another."
-- James Matthew Barrie

* * *

Sesshoumaru was being a pill again.

Kagome laid her chin on his left shoulder so that she had a better view of his face and immediately regretted it. Not that his face was bad to look at - quite, quite the opposite, she acknowledged, a little embarrassed - but she found the mild expression he wore slightly disturbing given his actions. He looked vaguely enlightened - even content - as they sped away from the wolf camp and traveled ever further south and west, and he kept his eyes in the middle distance, as though his mind were a million miles away. Which, given how poorly connected to reality he usually seemed to be, was probably true. Kagome sighed.

"You know," she said reproachfully from her perch on his back, "once was okay, and twice I could understand, but you don't have to keep squishing him. That can't be good for his health."

Sesshoumaru gave her a superior, appraising look from the corner of his eye before he returned his attention to the path in front of him, and she saw a faint smile on his lips. "Your observation has been duly noted," he told her, "and I will give it the consideration it deserves." Leisurely, he lifted his right hand, in which, pinned between elegantly clawed thumb and forefinger, Myouga struggled mightily as he healed from the last bone-crushing pinch Sesshoumaru had given him.

"Sesshoumaru-sama, please, I could not take the cold of the north! You know that!" the flea wailed. "I was only attempting to preserve this old body so... so that..." he waved his tiny limbs in an effort to communicate his great distress. Or

his great loyalty. It was difficult to tell. "So that..." he tried again.

The demon lord did not appear impressed, and Kagome winced as Myouga floundered. Pity forced her to take action and she interjected in what was probably a misguided attempt to save him. "So that he may live and continue to serve you!" she said quickly.

His golden eyes gave her another look, but she was used to it. "Hn," he said.

Then he squished Myouga again.

Kagome decided that she'd had enough. "Stop that!" she snapped, reaching over and smacking his hand, earning only an amused quirk of the lips for her efforts as Sesshoumaru moved his right hand out of her reach. She narrowed her eyes, recognizing the ancient game of keep-away. So he was going to be like that, was he? Well, she hadn't spent some fifteen years of her life as the sister to a little brother for nothing.

"Fine, be that way," she said huffily, drawing back and settling a little lower on his hips, hopefully giving him the impression that he had won. "See if I care." Kagome tossed her hair over her shoulder and looked away from him, apparently finding a haughty interest in the landscape that sped by.

"All right," he said, clearly entertained by her petulance. Kagome glared at the back of his head and listened to Myouga's plaintive cries as Sesshoumaru explained to his retainer - in a perfectly reasonable tone of voice - that he had not been given leave to stay at the wolf camp, and therefore needed to be reminded of proper procedures.

"Sesshoumaru-sama!"

"Now, now," Sesshoumaru replied as Kagome slowly shifted her weight and worked herself beneath the blanket of his hair to the other side of his body, "one would think that you would know how to ask for permission by now - after all, you are how old? - but seeing as how you are still ignorant, you require education."

"Sesshoumaru-sama..."

The demon lord shook his head. "Begging is useless - " he began.

Abruptly Kagome cut him off by shoving her right hand down the front of his armor in a most inappropriate manner. Then she wiggled her fingers in an even more inappropriate manner.

His mouth snapped shut. Startled into silence, Sesshoumaru shifted his eyes from the flea to his chest and stared at the offending appendage. Dimly, he tried to instruct his left hand to remove it from its intimate place on his person, but unfortunately the message seemed to keep getting waylaid on the way from his brain to his arm, so he carried on staring in disbelief and wondering why his stomach had gone all funny on him. He was almost too shocked, in fact, to pay attention to the rest of Kagome, which was drawing up over the opposite shoulder, leaning over, stretching out -

"Whoah!" he exclaimed with rather less dignity than he was accustomed to, jerking the flea out of her grasp. She tumbled against his shoulder and he scowled.

"I am not distracted so easily as that, miko!" he declared, despite evidence to the contrary.

"Damn!" he heard her say as her small hand emerged from its illicit den and she ducked back to his left side. "I almost had you!" she said sullenly, beating her little fist against his chest childishly.

Sesshoumaru sniffed, extending the flea straight in front of them so she would not be tempted to rescue him again. "No, you did not," he lied. "Never, at any point, did I lose control of the situation."

"Ha!" she barked. "I don't believe that for a moment."

"I am wounded deeply at your lack of faith in me," he said, voice dry.

"Yeah, I'll bet," she grumped, letting her chin drop again to its place on his shoulder before heaving a sigh that sounded almost like the sigh of a mother, exasperated with her disobedient offspring.

"Look, please stop abusing Myouga," she said, a pleading note creeping into her words. "It's just... not nice!"

Sesshoumaru twisted to look at her and raised a brow so high it nearly disappeared into his hair. "Indeed," he said. Clearly she wasn't used to the traditionally rough establishment of youkai hierarchy - Myouga had endured far worse and had come through no worse for the wear. On the other hand...

Kagome tilted her head so she could better pin him with her wide, compassionate eyes, putting him in mind of a hungry pup who wanted an extra cut of meat for dinner and who thought that looking wounded and pathetic would garner the sympathy necessary.

Unfortunately, it was working. Sesshoumaru swore silently as her face fell into an expression of almost-authentic heartbreak. "Please?" she begged, her form clinging slightly closer to him as though she could express her longing through pressure.

He was cursed - no, his whole damn line was cursed - no, all males everywhere were cursed. There was no other explanation. What was it about a sweetly pleading female that turned them all to butter? He'd never truly been able to resist, and really, really, she asked for so little and it couldn't hurt -

"Oh, very well," he exclaimed, exasperated with both her and himself. "If it will please you, you may have the worthless bastard." With the air of one granting a great boon he brought the flea to her cupped hand, growling at both of them in warning.

She paid him no mind. "Thank you," she said, her hand squeezing his shoulder in gratitude. He sighed with resigned acceptance of her victory as she urgently asked Myouga if he was all right.

Sesshoumaru scowled. Squishing the flea really wasn't that much fun anyway. Really.

Kagome looked at the flea in her hand with concern. Myouga was rubbing his bald head and wincing, a tiny flea-sized groan escaping from him. "I'm sorry," Kagome told him fervently, "I tried to get him to stop sooner - "

"Ah, Kagome-sama," the flea said, "it is not your fault. I deserved it."

"No you didn't!" she cried indignantly. "That's the silliest thing I ever heard. It was only a technicality anyway; I doubt Sesshoumaru would have insisted that you die of cold for him."

"Enough technicalities will grow into a calamity," Sesshoumaru announced to no one in particular.

Kagome opened her mouth to respond, but Myouga was flapping his hands as though to placate them both. "This is true, Kagome-sama," he said, "but of course I am willing to die for Sesshoumaru-sama. I am his servant!"

The servant's master snorted disbelievingly, and Kagome found herself siding with the demon lord; she'd never seen the flea willing to die for anything, except maybe food. Myouga ignored both his lord's incredulous laughter and Kagome's dubious look, instead hopping up to Kagome's shoulder and sliding down into her haori. "Regardless," she heard him chirp from the folds of her clothing, "I am sufficiently chastised. Next time I will not be so careless!"

Even though Kagome couldn't see his face, she had the distinct impression that Sesshoumaru had rolled his eyes, but Myouga continued obliviously. "Now," the flea commanded, "onward! We must make haste!"

Beneath her hands she could feel the shoulders of the demon lord lift and fall in a long-suffering sigh.

"Myouga-jii-chan!" Kagome admonished half-heartedly, but she could already feel him curling up against her collarbone, still too cold to stay awake for long. Her mouth twisted into a wry, resigned smile and she laid her chin against Sesshoumaru's shoulder once again, blinking into the cold wind that slipped by, whipping their hair back into a black and silver banner, swelling their clothing into curtains of red and white. Sesshoumaru flew steadily southward.

It had been four and a half days since she had woken with her head on his shoulder in their cozy mountainside shelter, and she thought they were making very good time. For one thing, they were going consistently downhill instead of up an incline, so it took much less effort to propel them along. For another, Sesshoumaru appeared to have grown weary of their journey, now wishing for it to be over as soon as possible, and so he carried her on his back. She had to admit it was better than both of them walking, and all it took was a small sacrifice of dignity. Sesshoumaru seemed to have a surfeit of it anyway, she reasoned, so losing a little bit of it wouldn't hurt.

In fact it had been a remarkably pleasant journey, even though she slept poorly each night, propped against a tree like her companion and covered in a heavy fur, and her only complaint was Sesshoumaru's seeming delight in punishing Myouga multiple times for one crime. He had been particularly vicious today. Kagome suspected he was bored, and itching for a fight in which his opponent could actually take his blows. Verbal sparring only went so far.

Idly, Kagome watched the landscape speed by and wondered how long it would take to get to Machiko. Even though she was furious with Kouga - not to mention his stupid son - she found herself incredibly anxious to find them and unite them with the newest additions to their family. After she kicked Kouga in the unmentionables, of course. Still, the most important thing was to deliver their package and then, maybe then, she could ask Kouga where Miroku and Sango and Shippou had gone. Then she could go home, and sleep in a bed, and be warm again.

She sighed a little wistfully. It was summer back home, and she'd been here for a little over a month now. Her mother would be worried.

In her chest, something lurched, dragging a dull edge down her middle.

Kagome blinked, surprised at how that thought seemed to shake her. Never before had thoughts of her family been a jarring thing in the Sengoku Jidai; they had always been a refuge when she began to long for the comforts of the modern era, even if the comforts of home no longer soothed her as they once had. Yet after her mother's concern the last time she had seen her - woefully well-placed concern, Kagome thought regretfully, absentmindedly flexing her scarred fingers - it suddenly seemed like her real life was a dream, misty and safe and secure, and her family seemed further away than even time could take them. Thoughts of them were difficult to hold, slippery, and there was an uncomfortable quality to them as well, as if their passage across her mind were out of place instead of natural.

Troubled, Kagome let her cheek come down to rest against her companion and sighed. She had time enough for psychoanalysis when she went home, she supposed, but right now she had a task to attend to, a duty to complete before she could indulge in thoughts of her soft bed and her mother's cooking. But of course then she would long for the clear air and her companions of the past.

She felt a frown creep onto her face at the thought. Perhaps she would be forever discontent no matter where she was or what time she was in, because those who were dear to her were no longer the same. Or perhaps the problem lay in her; perhaps it was her own failings that made her feel this way. Kagome sighed and huddled closer to Sesshoumaru and let her eyes unfocus, trying to find some peace in her own mind.

She was startled out of her reverie when the warm hands lightly gripping her legs tightened, and Sesshoumaru's claws pricked her, very slightly, through the thick fabric of her hakama.

"Hey," she said vaguely, lifting her head up to look at him. In her clothes, she heard Myouga's snores trip over themselves as he woke up, but she ignored the flea as he groggily climbed to the surface, choosing instead to study the far more

intriguing sight of Sesshoumaru's expression. She could tell from the look on his face that something was about to happen, and as it was probably more exciting than traveling she found the prospect not entirely unwelcome, despite the pensive air the demon had assumed.

Sesshoumaru's brows were drawn down into the frown he used to intimidate those he considered beneath him - which was everyone - and his lips had flattened into a thin line. She watched as he sniffed the air experimentally.

"Hmm," he said.

Kagome waited patiently for his train of thought to leave the station. "Yes?" she prompted after she felt an appropriate amount of time had passed.

He blinked and turned to her. "It appears Kouga and his wayward son have saved us quite a bit of time," he told her cryptically. Kagome did not appreciate this.

"Yes...?" she said again. Sesshoumaru gave her an annoyed look.

"Machiko is nearby," he elaborated. "probably in the nearest village, and Kouga and Akiyama appear to have found her first." He was flying high above the treetops, needing only to touch down on the occasional branch, and he could see the rising smoke and cleared land of a village perched just on the edge of the horizon.

"Oh, good," Kagome said. "That makes our job easier."

"This is possible," Sesshoumaru conceded, guiltily aware that Machiko's scent told him that she was in a great deal of distress, both physically and mentally. The last

time he had smelled that on a woman was when he had entered Izayoi's chambers for the second time, when she had been fading into darkness and taking her child with her. He decided that this information should probably be withheld from Kagome for as long as possible, for it would only upset her if she knew. He hoped she would not pounce on his careful wording and figure it out for herself.

She didn't. Instead, Kagome said thoughtfully, "That's weird." From the corner of his eye he could discern a slight frown marring her pretty face.

Not wanting to appear out of the loop, Sesshoumaru waited for her to enlighten him as to what she found strange about the situation. She liked the sound of her own voice, after all, so he had no doubt that she would seize this fabulous opportunity to hear herself speak. He waited expectantly.

She did not disappoint. "Why would Akiyama be here? I thought he wanted to avoid his responsibility, not run to it."

Sesshoumaru shrugged. "Perhaps Kouga persuaded him otherwise," he suggested.

"Maaaaaybe," Kagome said, her tone of voice making it abundantly clear what she thought of Kouga's persuasive talents. "But then why would they seek out Machiko if they didn't have the herbs they needed?"

"To lead us to her?" Myouga piped up from her collar. Deep in thought, Kagome shook her head.

"But then if he found Akiyama, why didn't he send him our way to take this little burden off our hands?"

Good question, Sesshoumaru thought, frowning. Absentmindedly he angled them in the direction of the village where he detected the fickle hime and their wayward allies, and attempted to unravel the puzzle before him. Distantly, he reflected that Kagome must be rubbing off on him, as he was more accustomed to simply slicing through knots rather than taking the time to disentangle them, but at least it was something with which to keep his mind occupied. He let himself sink gingerly into contemplation.

Sesshoumaru was so deeply embroiled in this new sensation that the angry shout rising up to meet him would have escaped his notice if Kagome had not tensed beneath his fingers. He snapped out of his musings just in time to dodge the downsweep of a katana. Bewildered, Sesshoumaru darted backwards, keeping himself between Kagome and his attacker, who plummeted toward the trees before swiftly turning and glaring up at them with angry green eyes, the source of all their troubles.

The feeling of thoughtfulness gave way to the far more familiar sensation of annoyance.

Akiyama was oblivious. "I'm not letting you near that village, you bastard!" he yelled as he touched down on a tree branch and shot upwards again.

Silently Sesshoumaru cursed his lack of available limbs, and then he cursed his lack of viable weapons; even if he had an arm free he wasn't sure he could draw Toukijin from his sash without slicing Kagome's leg to ribbons. Mostly, though, he cursed stupid wolves who didn't know what was good for them. He flexed his right hand and released its hold on Kagome - he felt her tense around him in response to the loss of support - as he readied his poisonous claws and cleared his mind of extraneous distractions.

Unfortunately, it soon became apparent that someone else wished to have a word with them as well. Sesshoumaru was so focused on keeping himself between Akiyama and Kagome that he didn't register the second attacker until he was ten feet away and closing fast. Intensely annoyed, Sesshoumaru whirled in the air as Kouga came up to greet them before planting his feet squarely in the wolf's chest and using his hapless ally as a jumping point.

Sesshoumaru and Kagome shot further into the air. Stomach bathed in icy panic, Kagome peered over Sesshoumaru's shoulder with growing dismay as Kouga flipped over, regained his upward momentum, and drew alongside his still-advancing son. She was at a loss; she didn't understand why they would be attacking the very allies who had undertaken such a dangerous mission for their sake - it didn't make any sense! Even worse, she felt betrayal drag its ragged claws through her stomach as she numbly watched their one-time allies surge forward in attack. As the wolf prince placed a supporting, fatherly hand on his son's shoulder, Kagome let out a wounded gasp.

Then Kouga turned and punched Akiyama across the jaw.

Kagome blinked. Uncomprehending, she saw the younger wolf tumbled downwards as Kouga continued toward them, a sharp, satisfied grin on his face.

She decided that this moment called for action.

"What the hell?" Kagome said. As actions went, it wasn't much, but it was better than letting her mouth hang open and risk exposing the world to the teeth she hadn't brushed in almost a week.

Sesshoumaru made a sound in his throat that was probably an agreement, but his inflection was lost in the wind and she couldn't discern if it was a soft version of the 'I Know Something You Don't Know' laugh, or a sharp version of the 'Surely

This Sesshoumaru Does Not Deserve This Aggravation' sigh. It was hard to tell with him, sometimes.

"Oy!" Kouga yelled up at them. "Give me Kagome!"

There was that little groan again - that was definitely the sigh, Kagome decided - and Sesshoumaru straightened from his defensive posture.

"Why," he said impatiently, "should I?" Casually he moved away from the wolf prince, darting down and back in a move that caused Kagome's heart temporarily relocate to her mouth.

"Eep," she urked. Neither demon paid attention.

Kouga looked even more annoyed than before. "Because my son is not convinced that you won't slaughter his family," Kouga shot back, following. "He's decided he likes them now."

"Hn," Sesshoumaru replied blandly. "What faith my allies place in me."

They were almost to the village now. Kouga growled, drawing level. "I don't want Kagome to get hurt. Just give her to me while you kick his ass, will ya?"

Sesshoumaru was momentarily torn. On the one hand, with Kagome he could not wield a weapon, and she threw off his balance, which was a terrible hindrance in one-on-one combat. On the other hand, he didn't trust the wolf to protect her, which would be bad as that was his self appointed job. Decisions, decisions...

"Please," Kagome whispered in his ear, making up his mind for him, "I don't want to hinder you. Please."

Reluctantly, Sesshoumaru turned in the air as Kouga sailed by, and he felt her familiar weight leave him as the wolf scooped her up in his arms and headed for solid ground. Sighing, he turned back to the task at hand and drew Toukijin from its resting place, resigning himself to a fight that promised little in the way of excitement, and only a negligible arm workout.

Kagome squinted up at the youkai lord from her place in Kouga's arms, following his graceful movements as he darted across the sky, sleeves trailing behind him in the wind, hair shining in the early afternoon sun. He was so pleasant to watch that she almost didn't even notice when metal met metal and he sent the young wolf crashing downwards into the branches.

"He's not going to get hurt, is he?" she asked anxiously.

"Sesshoumaru?" Kouga said incredulously. "That asshole goes ballistic and takes out whole forests when he gets a nick in his precious armor. He'll be fine."

With a flash of guilt, Kagome remembered the time she had actually hit him with an arrow and shattered said armor before she brushed it aside. "No," she said with exasperation. "I meant Akiyama. He just fell in that maple tree over there."

"Ah-ha," Kouga said. "If he does get hurt, it would serve him right."

Kagome moved her eyes from Sesshoumaru's figure and looked up at her current handler as they hit the ground and he took off running. "You aren't very forgiving of your son, you know," she said, letting just a hint of disapproval leak into her voice.

The wolf just shrugged. "Well, he is kind of a shit," Kouga said nonchalantly. "Frankly, I'm just surprised he decided to take any responsibility, even if it was the wrong kind of responsibility at the time."

"What do you mean, wrong - oh, yeah!" she exclaimed. "I forgot, I'm not speaking to you, you... you ass!" Kagome crossed her arms and jerked her head to face away from him with as much dignity as one could muster while being carried and jostled.

"What? You just were!" Kouga said, befuddled. "Why aren't you talking to me now?"

Kagome, busy having flashbacks to dragon goop and disfigurement, declined to answer.

Kouga looked at the miko in his arms and sighed inwardly. There had been a time when this would have been the perfect opportunity to try and steal a kiss from her lovely mouth, but, unfortunately, with middle age came a disturbing trend towards more fatherly feelings concerning pretty young ladies. It was depressing that now, after all these years of her memory trailing wistful fingers over him, she should be in his arms, scolding him and prettily petulant, and his first inclination was not illicit kisses but rather the overwhelming urge to chastize her and send her to bed without her share of rabbit. One of life's little ironies, he supposed. How the times did change.

Less than a minute later they were skidding to a stop on the outskirts of the village where Kouga and Akiyama had obviously set up camp. Kagome tried not to wrinkle her nose at the remains of various small rodent carcasses half-buried in the dust, remembering her own brush with lupine eating habits, and hopped out of Kouga's embrace as soon as they had halted. Smoothing her wind-blown hair,

Kagome turned and stalked away from him to stand at the outskirts of the clearing and glare at the forest with righteous indignation.

"Kagome," she heard him say, tone conciliatory. "I'm sorry I sent you off on such a terrible mission, but I had no other choice. You know that. You would never let a girl and her baby suffer, would you?"

Damn him and his stupid appeal to reason! "Of course not," she sniffed, staring at a particularly interesting twig, "but I didn't expect to get permanent scars from the ordeal either!" Not, she thought with a tickle of guilt, that my fingers are more important than two lives, but they're my fingers. I really liked them the way they were. Kagome was aware that she was being childish, but she was tired of traveling and mucking about in other people's problems and generally being taken advantage of. Everyone wanted something from her. Please kill the youkai, miko-sama! What herbs should I use for this disease, miko-sama? Fetch this medicine, Kagome, do you have those wonderful snacks, Kagome, find those shards - In fact, the only person who didn't seem to want something was Sesshoumaru, and he was... was... well, he was him.

She was being mean and petty, and knowing that made it worse. Kagome sighed, chastising herself for her selfishness. On the other hand, a friend would have at least warned her of what she was in for. Kagome turned and gave Kouga a speculative look.

Kouga, for his part, took a step back, not liking the appraising light in her eyes one bit. He took another step when she pivoted and strode toward him with something akin to determination gracing her steps.

When she reached him, Kagome halted, stared him in the eye, and threw her arms around him.

"What - ?" Kouga said, mildly incoherently. Kagome was beginning to worry him - this was her second mood-swing in as many minutes, and the way she was see-sawing between affection and anger was extremely disconcerting. Nevertheless, she was still a pretty girl, and he wasn't one to deny her a hug. He put his arms around her.

"Kouga..." she murmured, sending a warm breath of air across his ear, and suddenly he was no longer feeling purely paternal toward her, and as she shifted, rubbing her hips across his, he crash-landed in perilously lascivious territory.

"Uh..." He struggled to think, but she was speaking again.

"Kouga," she whispered, her chest pressing against his, "I'm sorry."

He was getting extremely muzzy. With effort, he galvanized his tongue into action. "Um... sorry for wh - " he began.

Kagome jerked her well-placed knee.

There was a pause, and then Kouga gurgled and slid to the ground as she stepped back.

That was almost better than a rosary, Kagome thought, her vengeance satisfied. "You deserved that," she informed him. "Now we're even and I forgive you."

Kouga, curled in face-down in a fetal position, just nodded his head and wheezed. Kagome scratched her scarred fingers and strolled away to find a suitable place to sit.

He did deserve it. He knew this. That didn't make it hurt less, of course, but at least he didn't feel guilty any longer. Who would have thought his innocent little Kagome would stoop to such underhanded tactics to exact her revenge! Bemused, he concentrated on controlling his breathing and willed the pain to go away.

After a minute, black shoes and white hakama appeared at the edge of his vision. He didn't even bother looking up to see the face of his ally, who was no doubt highly entertained by the situation.

"I see Kagome has informed you of her opinion regarding our journey," Sesshoumaru said with amusement. He hadn't really expected the little miko to go through with her threat to visit pain upon the wolf prince, but he wasn't exactly surprised either. She was a very... honest woman, and he found her justice swift and fitting - a curse upon Kouga's line, as it were. Of course, he was also terribly pleased to see the wolf brought low and groaning in the dirt because of a human girl; it was appropriately humiliating.

"Where's Akiyama?" Kagome asked from her perch on one of the fallen trees.

"Recovering," Sesshoumaru replied, looking up at her. He hadn't hurt the hot-headed youth too much, after all; he would be along any minute now, and then they could call an end to this annoying quest. "I suggest we leave our delivery here and depart."

To his vague dismay, Kagome frowned. "I still need to talk to Kouga about something," she told him. "Would it be all right if we stayed a little longer?"

Inwardly he sighed with reluctance, but there was no reason they couldn't wait for five more minutes. Behind him, something came crashing through the trees.

Kagome smiled when she saw the young wolf slide to a stop, his hair whipping around his face with the momentum of his run - he very much resembled his father in that moment - and look around frantically. She saw his eyes light upon his father's hunched figure.

"You!" he howled, lunging toward Sesshoumaru. She thought she heard the demon sigh as he leapt high into the air.

"Do be silent, whelp," he said from his position over their heads, "it was the miko, not I."

Akiyama stopped his attack and looked at Kagome suspiciously. "You?" he said, clearly doubting Kagome's abilities as a warrior. She felt a little annoyed by that.

"Yes, me," she snapped back at him.

The dubious look on his face deepened as Sesshoumaru touched down beside her. "How?" he wanted to know.

Kagome sniffed. "I hugged him. Then I hit him where it hurts."

Akiyama winced. "Why?"

Her patience was running thin. "Because," she said with exasperation, "he trapped us into an extremely difficult mission, and it sucked. I just wanted to let him know that it wasn't appreciated." She sniffed primly and made a show of smoothing her hakama.

"Oh," the young wolf said. She watched as he walked over to his father and prodded him with a toe. "You okay?" he asked.

Kouga groaned and sat up. "I'm feeling better," he told his son, and his tone of voice was so dejected that Kagome almost felt bad about her trick. Almost.

After a moment Kouga shook his dark hair out of his eyes and huffed. "So," he said, clearly wanting to move on from the subject of his rather ignominious defeat, "do you have it?"

Kagome nodded and stood. Turning her back to them she reached inside her haori and fished the package out. "Kouga," she said as she performed the slight acrobatics needed to keep her clothes in at least a modest state, "why didn't you come and get it from us when you found Akiyama?" Vaguely triumphantly she pulled it out and began to straighten her top again.

She heard the wolf sigh. "There have been... complications," he said carefully.

Complications, Kagome thought, turning back, the parcel clutched in her hands. Oh, good. This sounds like the sort of complications that pop up on family vacations when you're thirty thousand feet in the air and the pilot announces that there are complications right before you hit the side of the mountain and have to eat your mother-in-law. I love complications.

"Complications?" Sesshoumaru voiced her question for her, though his voice was steeped in displeasure instead of worry.

Kagome watched Kouga run a hand through his hair, his agitated fingers making more of a mess than if he had just left it alone. "The hime is experiencing

problems with the pregnancy. She and her maid were forced to stop here, but the village has not been... receptive... to a girl carrying a hanyou child. They put her in a little abandoned hut, and Akiyama told me that he arrived only just in time to kick the crap out of some punks who were bothering her. He originally came in case you showed up first - " here he shot a reproving look at his stoic ally " - but she was in so much danger that we stayed to make sure she would be safe."

As Kouga spoke, Kagome saw Akiyama's face falling, and the expression crawling across his features was horrible - it was a mixture of dread, anxiety, and the only barely dawning comprehension of the troubles he had wrought for the child and its mother. In her chest, her heart gave a little half-twist and she began to realize, for the first time, the true gravity of the situation. That someone would harass a clearly frightened and pregnant girl - ! It made her sick to her stomach, closed her throat in a half-realized gag, made her insides slide over and around themselves in visceral disgust.

"Where is she?"

Kagome hadn't known that she had spoken until Akiyama took a step toward her. In his neck, she saw the muscles work in a hard, dry swallow. "Just through those trees," he pointed. "I'll take you to her, if you want."

She nodded. He started off, shoulders bowed, and Kagome followed him, still clutching the precious package in her cold hands.

Sesshoumaru stood in the clearing with Kouga and watched her go.

They were both silent for a moment. "Hn," Sesshoumaru said finally, apparently addressing the air. "I see she has you well-trained."

He heard the wolf snort. "I would not be talking if I were you," he replied.

Sesshoumaru snapped his head toward the wolf. "I would not speak of things of which I know nothing if I were you, which, thankfully, I am not," he retorted coldly.

Kouga snickered again, but declined to comment. When it was apparent their exchange was at an end Sesshoumaru walked to the nearest tree and sat, leaning against its trunk, to wait for Kagome to return.

* * *

Machiko was dying. Kagome was hit with the thick, stuffy smell of the sickroom the second she stepped inside the hut and her eyes alighted on the hime's pale face, covered in a sheen of sweat. She lay beneath a heavy kimono, and even Kagome could hear her labored breathing as it rasped through her lungs, dragging over her teeth. Her thin, nervous maid knelt by her side, brushing the damp strands of hair from the hime's forehead and murmuring soft, calming nothings to her, though she stopped and looked up when they walked in. Dimly, Kagome wondered what had become of the carriage and the coachman they had been traveling in, but it probably didn't matter.

Akiyama stood just to the side of the door, head bowed and hair obscuring his eyes from her, but she could see his clenched fists trembling at his sides, and she could hear his teeth grinding in impotent frustration. Kagome felt guilty about all the uncharitable thoughts she had allowed herself to think about him; despite what his father said, he cared deeply, and it was killing him to see his one-time lover in agony.

One thing was abundantly clear. The girl needed the medicine now.

Feeling so out of her depth that she might have been in the middle of the ocean, Kagome squared her shoulders. "Myouga," she said, her voice stronger than her suddenly knocking knees would suggest.

Beneath her clothes she felt the flea rustle. "Kagome-sama?" he replied.

"How do we prepare this?" She gestured to the package in her hand.

She heard him swallow hard. "Kagome-sama, the medicine will induce la - "

"I know that," she said before turning to the maid. "Do you know how to deliver a baby?" she asked.

The maid looked nervously from side to side, licking her lips. "I have... assisted in births before," she said cautiously. "I thought you were trained...?"

"I'm not," Kagome told her, only slightly regretfully. "You're going to have to do this. Do you think you can?" Please, please say you can. All I know about delivering babies I learned from the movies. It involves breathing. And pushing. I think.

For a moment, Kagome thought all was lost and she would be forced to deliver a baby blindly, but then the maid gave a firm nod of her head. "Yes," she replied. "Yes, I think I know what to do."

Giving her a relieved, grateful smile, Kagome turned back to Myouga, who cleared

his throat. "Prepare it in a tea," he said. "Keep giving it to her until the process begins, and if there are complications, make her drink another cup."

"I'll fetch the water," Akiyama said suddenly, surprising her. She watched as he snatched one of the dusty pots piled by the fire and hurried out of the hut, every line of his body speaking of his tension and worry.

"I will, uh, go with him," Myouga coughed. Kagome frowned but she let him go. He was a coward in the best of times, but this - this was something entirely different. On the map of life experience, the uncharted waters of childbearing were shoved to the side and labeled 'here be dragons.' It was strange that even though she was a modern woman she should know nothing of it. It just wasn't... touched upon, really. She was familiar with the mechanics of sex - intellectually, at least - but the consequences of it were a mystery.

Kagome bit her lip as she walked softly toward the hime before sinking to her knees beside her.

With great effort, as though she were inhaling water, Machiko drew a breath and opened her glassy eyes. "Miko-sama..." she said weakly.

Kagome put a finger to her lips. "You'll be all right," she assured her, though in truth she had no idea if she would be all right at all. What if she died?

Machiko's eyelids drooped closed again and Kagome chewed her lower lip earnestly.

"You will need to help me."

Startled, Kagome looked up at the maid, who had spoken. "What?" she said. "No, I can't help you, I don't know anything about this!"

The maid shrugged. "You are a woman," she said simply, as if being a woman came with an instruction manual.

Panic flooded her mind, but what else could she do?

Nothing, she realized with growing dread. She could not just leave. Deliver this baby, miko-sama...

Her mounting fear was interrupted by Akiyama, tossing the hanging door aside and lurching forward anxiously to set the now-full pot of water over the cooking fire. Kagome felt as though she were in a daze, and she watched with a strange, agitated detachment as the maid strode forward purposefully, taking the package that contained the precious herbs from Kagome's hands before she shooed the wolf out of the hut.

They were silent as they waited for the water to boil, and only Machiko's labored breathing and the crackle of the fire broke the silence, though each noise danced on her nerves, manifesting as almost a physical weight moving against her skin. Kagome squirmed, trying to clear her mind and still her pounding heart. The tension was almost too much to bear.

"Miko-sama," the maid said after a moment. She did not lift her eyes from the pot as she waited for the water to begin its bubbling dance.

Kagome jumped at the sound. "Eh?" she replied. It was not the sharpest of responses, but given the circumstances she thought she was doing pretty damn well.

"What was your name again?" the maid said.

"My name? Oh - Kagome. Um. And yours?"

"Yukiko."

There was a pause, and in it she could hear the water begin to roil in its iron prison.

"Are you ready, Kagome-sama?"

Kagome wanted to say something strong, or flippant, or clever - anything to offset what she actually felt, which was sick. Unable to open her mouth, she just nodded. She could feel her legs, cold and hollow, shaking beneath her as she sat on the hard dirt floor and watched Yukiko open the package - that damn package that she and Sesshoumaru had gone to so much trouble to procure - and then dump it without ceremony into the boiling water.

It took only a few minutes, and then Yukiko was ladling the brew into a bowl and passing it over to Kagome. Turning to the hime, Kagome worked her fingers beneath her neck and tried to lift her head so that she could take the tea.

Machiko was too weak. She could feel the girl's skull - strange how heavy and how fragile it seemed - lolling over her own fragile hands, the thick hair grating over itself, making her hold slippery.

Anxiously Kagome set the cup down and moved to the head of the meager pile of

blankets. She swept the heavy curtain of hair aside before awkwardly slipping her hand beneath the girl's neck and rolling her into something resembling a half-reclined position.

"Machiko-sama, you must drink," Kagome said urgently as she cupped the girl's chin and coaxed it open. Machiko gave a grunt of pain, but opened her mouth and drank as Kagome poured the tea down her throat. Once she was done Kagome handed it back to Yukiko, who filled it again.

After the fourth cup, Kagome was beginning to panic, and her back and thighs were beginning to hurt from propping the heavy hime up against her own body.

"Why isn't it working?" she asked anxiously. Unconsciously she rubbed her thumbs across the scars on her index fingers as she ground her teeth. Funny, but she couldn't seem to get enough air, either.

Yukiko shook her head, her brow wrinkled in a worry that mirrored Kagome's. "I do not know," she said, her voice pitching slightly higher in panic as she filled the cup a fifth time. "I will need more water soon if she does not begin." When she handed the bowl over, her hand was shaking, spilling a little of the scalding water over Kagome's own fingers. Kagome hissed and drew the bowl to her side, blowing on the surface of the tea to cool it before tipping it once more into Machiko's mouth.

Halfway through, the hime jerked in her arms, and Kagome cried out as the bowl was knocked from her hands to soak through the kimono and splash against the floor, but her cry was drowned out by Machiko's own keening groan. Distantly, Kagome could hear the clatter of the ladle in the pot, and Yukiko stumbled into her line of vision.

"What has happened?" she cried, her birdlike hands fluttering out toward her

mistress.

"I don't know, I don't know," Kagome babbled as the hime groaned again and her back bowed under what seemed to be some kind of pressure.

Swiftly the maid reached beneath the spread kimono and hiked the girl's legs up into a bent position before throwing the coverings back to between the girl's spread knees. Blushing furiously Kagome moved as though to lay the girl back down.

"No! Stay there!" Yukiko barked. Frightened, Kagome complied, snaking an arm across the girl's chest to hold her in place and averting her eyes.

This is the most humiliating thing I have ever seen, she thought numbly. Her childhood dreams of happy motherhood were becoming stained with the scent of dying and pungent herbs and the groans of the girl in her arms. She tried to calm her breathing as the hime moaned piteously once more.

"Too fast, too fast," she heard Yukiko mutter frantically as she knelt between the girls legs. "Kagome!"

Kagome's head jerked up, and she stared wide-eyed at the woman in front of her.

"Massage her belly."

"What? How - ?"

"Gently, try to get her to relax, and don't let her move too much. I will be right

back."

"What?" Kagome almost said, but she was too slow. The word was only halfway to her mouth when Yukiko reached the door and ducked out, another pot clutched in her thin fingers, and Kagome was left alone with the girl.

Oh god, she thought, oh god oh god, this is so unbelievably bad there is no word to describe it. I'm going to have to invent a new one just for this experience.

At a loss, Kagome propped the girl a little higher and reached around her to place her hands on her belly. As she began to move her hands over the strange, taught skin beneath the heavy cloth, Machiko tipped backwards, her head hitting Kagome's collarbone with bruising force.

Then they were pressed cheek to cheek, and Kagome felt the hime's scalding tears slide down her own face.

* * *

The sun had gone down half an hour ago, and still the girl shrieked in her wooden prison. Sesshoumaru ground his teeth and tried to block the screams from his skull, but it was no use; they grated down the inside of his brain like fingernails.

The two wolf demons in the clearing were on edge; Kouga was methodically dismembering what Sesshoumaru could only assume was a particularly offensive tree, and Akiyama was pacing with steps so violent he had already worn a shallow trench into the dirt. Both of them would stop periodically to rake a hand through their hair in exactly the same manner before resuming their occupations. Their

agitation was both entertaining and entirely understandable.

What Sesshoumaru did not understand was his own reaction to the situation.

He fidgeted, a restless anxiety clawing its way through his body, and he didn't know why.

No, that wasn't true; he did know why, but he didn't know why.

The worst part was the smell. He could smell the blood, the birth fluids, the pungent brew, and the sweat emanating from the little hut, but those scents were not the causes of his agitation. No, the scent that made his claws twitch involuntarily - preludes to an action he could not name - was the scent of feminine distress: the hime's, the maid's... and Kagome's.

Kagome was exhausted and frightened.

He did not like that at all. It made him want to pierce his own skin to free the frustration inside him. It made him want to crawl out of his own bones.

Sesshoumaru felt a growl grate its way across his throat.

It was because he'd spent so much time in her company, he decided. He was used to her damnable scent the way it usually was: calm, determined, bright - occasionally exasperated, he thought with more than a little gleeful pride - and confident. Now that it had changed it was making him extremely uncomfortable to smell these new layers to it. The contrast was too jarring from her normal smell, as if she was suddenly obscured and changed, altered in ways entirely unpleasant to him.

He should have never let her go with that stupid wolf.

"Oh, stop sighing, mutt."

Sesshoumaru's head snapped up and he leveled one of his more impressive glares at Kouga, who had spoken. The wolf was standing ten feet away, hands on his hips, tail swishing angrily. Sesshoumaru arched a brow and refused to dignify the obvious baiting.

Kouga crossed his arms. "Babies just don't slide into the world, you know," he continued. "It takes time, so quit being such an ass about it."

With great effort, Sesshoumaru kept his other eyebrow from shooting up to his hairline in surprise; if Kouga was mistaking his disturbance for impatience, he certainly was not going to correct him.

"Your progeny," he said as icily as he could, "should no longer be our concern."

"Our concern?" Kouga pounced on the word. "Oh, so you two are a team now?"

Sesshoumaru felt his lip curl in a barely repressed growl, but it was no use. The wolf saw the slight flash of sharp white teeth in the dim twilight, and grinned.

"I don't think I'm the one who's been trained," he said, and he was already leaping backwards, the sword at his hip out and deflecting Toukijin's sharp sidestroke, and Sesshoumaru snarled as the wolf jumped into the trees, laughing. "Here, boy!" Kouga called, darting away.

Sesshoumaru followed, boiling blood singing, welcoming the clearly deliberate distraction from the scent of Kagome's distress as he and Kouga sailed up into the night sky to spar.

Inside the hut, the world had become tiny and sharp. Kagome's arms ached. Her shoulders ached. Her back ached. Her thighs ached. Her abdomen ached. Her head ached.

Her heart ached most of all.

She had never thought one person could cry so much, but the sleeve of her haori was soaked through, and the hime's beautiful face was swollen and blotchy, slippery with snot. Mechanically Kagome ran her hands in heavy strokes over the girls belly, though every bone in her arms screamed for her to stop, soothing the tight muscles and relaxing Machiko's body by force. Time and time again she had to halt her massaging motions as the girl convulsed in pain, and Kagome desperately covered her hand in the thick fabric of her sleeve and put it to the girl's lips, wincing as Machiko bit down so hard she left bruises.

"Breathe, breathe, relax, breathe, push when you need to, breathe," she chanted to the girl over and over. "You'll be done soon, it will be okay, you are almost through." Little promises that she didn't fully believe herself fell from her mouth and seemed to patter to the floor, unheeded. Occasionally though, she felt the girl's head nod against her shoulder and the hime would quiet for a few moments before she was once again wracked with pain. Kneeling at her feet, Yukiko slowly massaged the girl's lower back, occasionally stopping to wipe away the excrement or amniotic fluid that leaked out, cleaning her with fresh water, speaking to her mistress in soothing tones all the while.

Kagome had long ago given up complaining in her head. There didn't seem to be

any point to it, really, and it was patently ridiculous to feel sorry for herself in the face of so much pain.

Circle circle, stroke stroke, she thought, circle circle, stroke stroke, circle, bite... circle, stroke stroke, circle circle, stroke stroke, circle circle, stroke stroke -

"Ah!"

Wearily Kagome lifted her head to see Yukiko's face light up as she down. "The baby!" the maid gasped, the tired lines around her eyes and mouth smoothing into delight. "Hime-sama, just a little more, just a little more - "

Machiko threw her head back and screamed, and Kagome clung to her as Machiko's fingers scrabbled against her arm, grabbing her already bruised hand and squeezing so mightily that Kagome barely bit back her own cry of pain.

"Breathe, hime-sama, breathe, do not push too hard," Yukiko cried. "Let him come, let him come on his own - "

Kagome struggled to brush away the heavy mantle of pain and exhaustion, desperately trying to remember what happened now and finally pouncing on a faint memory.

"Breathe with me, Machiko," she said, though she was so tired it came out as a groan. "In, in, out... can you do that?" She felt the girl nod, her sobs shuddering through both of them.

"You are so brave," Kagome told her, the platitude seeming stupid, absurd in its inadequacy, but Machiko did not seem to notice. Instead she struggled to breathe

in the pattern Kagome had just hissed, and Kagome let the girl crush her hand with her grip as they breathed together.

"Almost, almost, almost - !" Yukiko chanted on the edge of Kagome's hearing, and then Machiko gave one last shriek and Yukiko cried out in joy.

"Ah! He is here! He is beautiful!" Kagome didn't even look up to watch Yukiko do... whatever it was that one did with newborns.

"Just push a little more, and you may rest," the maid said. Then Machiko pushed twice, and the baby slid out into the world, wet and screaming and alive.

Within moments he was rubbed clean, and Yukiko tied the cord, passing him to his mother's quaking arms.

He was huge, and he had wolf ears. Kagome thought she saw his wet tail give a tired wag, and then it was over.

Machiko was still crying, and the baby's own wail rose in tandem with hers. Yukiko appeared next to Kagome, gently taking the hime from her aching arms and laying her back to rest on her meager bed.

Kagome crawled away, too tired to be grateful, only feeling a vague weight lifting from her shoulders as she wearily climbed to her feet.

"Don't go anywhere yet," Yukiko told her. "We aren't finished."

"What - ?"

The maid scooted back to her place between the girl's legs. "Just a minute," she said.

Kagome decided that since waiting did not involve moving in any way, she could probably manage it. She waited, trying not to lean on her bruised hands.

After a few minutes she heard Yukiko give a sharp intake of breath and then, " - ah - !"

One minute later Kagome stood outside in the cold, gagging and letting the afterbirth in her hands flop to the ground.

Spitting bile, Kagome decided that she was going to kill someone. Maybe herself. Or whoever had decided that she was a miko reincarnated, because she was most definitely not cut out for this.

There is no way in hell, she thought half-coherently as she bent and chopped at the ground with the crude shovel she had unearthed from the huts plundered stores. Her spent arms trembled with the effort, but the adrenaline in her system didn't go to waste. In ten minutes she had a decent hole in the hard earth, and Kagome fell to her knees and pushed the placenta in before mechanically shoving the dirt back into the hole with her hands, too tired to stand unless it was absolutely necessary.

When she was finished she stared at the little mound of dirt for a full five minutes, not thinking of anything much, before she was able to galvanize herself to her feet and go back inside the hut.

Her legs were so tired she thought she might fall when she crouched next to the bucket and dipped a scrap of cloth into it, wringing it out before scrubbing the disgusting detritus from her hands.

No, mom, she thought, I don't want to give you grandchildren. I'm adopting. Yes I am.

Yup.

She let the damp, dirty cloth fall where it may in the corner before she trudged back into the cold to inform Akiyama that his son was born.

Her feet fascinated her. She stared at them as they moved surprisingly steadily, one in front of the other, toward the clearing where she had left the men.

Left, right, left, right, she thought. Left, right, left, right, left, right, left, clash, left, ri -

Wait, no. Something is amiss.

There was another clang of metal against metal, and as Kagome entered the clearing she looked up to find Sesshoumaru and Kouga leaping through the trees and slashing viciously at one another like a pair of monkeys on PCP.

Kagome stared, slowly discovering that she was definitely not too tired to be pissed off.

This is good, Sesshoumaru thought, wind whipping through his hair, this is

definitely the distraction I needed. Kouga was not the most skilled of sparring partners, but he was fast, and that partially made up for his terrible technique. Only partially, though. Sesshoumaru found himself holding back so as not to injure him, but luckily the physical exertion required to chase the wolf through the barren trees was enough to work the anxious kinks out of his muscles.

Without warning, Kouga leapt high into the air, and Sesshoumaru saw an opening. He touched and sprang, sword ready in one hand, the other in a fist, ready to knock the wolf out. In slow motion, he saw Kouga's eyes widen as he realized his mistake, and the wolf twisted, as though on a noose, but there was no way to correct it as Sesshoumaru drew up, raising Toukijin to block -

"Kouga-kun!"

- and the wolf was distracted, his sword twisting, and Sesshoumaru had to dodge to correct his block, the impact sending both of them in opposite directions, concentration - and subsequently balance - shattered. At the last moment Sesshoumaru managed to flip over and land safely on a branch half way up one of the naked trees, but Kouga was not so lucky. Sesshoumaru watched as the wolf smacked into one of the more solid branches of a maple and tumbled down to earth, forearms shielding his face as he landed in a crouch, scratched and bruised. Transferring his gaze to the source of the voice he also found the source of his anxiety, still tired but no longer frightened, and quite, quite exasperated.

Ah, he thought. Much better.

Kagome felt slightly guilty as Kouga brought his arms down and straightened, but only slightly. So typical of men! She was working her ass off to help bring a new life into the world, and they were busy waving their swords at each other in what was no doubt some kind of contest replete with subtext. Not to mention the father was nowhere to be seen!

Not knowing what else to do, Kagome stamped her foot as Kouga frowned at her.

"Why are you yelling at me?" he demanded.

"Because you are fighting like children, and I am cranky," Kagome snapped.

"No," the wolf corrected himself, "why are you yelling at me? Your mutt was fighting with me!"

Kagome ignored the slight rumble she heard from Sesshoumaru at the words 'your mutt' - what was it with people assuming he belonged to her, anyway? - and crossed her arms. "Because," she said, slightly calmer, "the person who started the fight was probably you. Go ahead and tell me I'm wrong and I'll apologize."

In the dim light of the rising moon, Kagome could swear that Kouga had flushed slightly. He opened his mouth after a moment, but Kagome waved her hand as though dismissing him.

"Anyway," she said, transferring her gaze from one to the other meaningfully, "I came to announce that the child is born, and he and the mother are in good health. Where, by the way, is the father?"

She saw Kouga's face melt into a sharp grin at the news. "Akiyama? Oh, he couldn't stand the tension so he went for a run."

Closing her eyes, Kagome pinched the bridge of her nose, feeling extremely put out. He couldn't stand the tension? He couldn't stand the tension?

"Er," she heard Kouga say, "I'll just go find him, right?" Without waiting for an answer, she heard his feet slide over the dirt, and he was gone.

She and Sesshoumaru were both silent for a long moment before Kagome finally opened her eyes and looked up at him. She was only slightly surprised to find him returning her gaze.

It was so strange to remember that he was a demon, sometimes. She forgot that fact so easily, but in the light of the moon it was impossible to avoid it. Beneath the night sky his hair shone, silver and white, the undertones of blue fading in the shadows, and his pristine white clothes and pale skin seemed almost luminous. He was beautiful, and she felt something in her chest clench at the sight.

He blinked and she realized she had been staring. Kagome cursed her overly tired brain and turned away from him, suddenly too exhausted to remain standing. Clumsily she sank to her knees and tried to find a comfortable position that did not involve placing her bruised palms against the ground, finally settling for crossing her legs and resting her forehead against her wrists.

Ungh, she thought. It was not terribly eloquent, but she thought that it summed up her state of existence quite succinctly. She listened to herself breathing, drifting -

"Kagome," she heard him say, dropping his voice into the night between them like a pebble into a pond. She felt the ripples of him wash over her.

She was so tired...

Some noise jerked her out of her doze and she sat up straight, blinking away the

light bleariness in her eyes. "What?" she said, but she needn't have bothered. The trail of cold dust flying up in a straight line through the clearing and in the direction of Machiko's hut was enough to tell her that she had been yanked into consciousness by the passing of two excited wolves. She blinked a little more, trying to clear the fog in her head.

Sesshoumaru watched her blink as she drifted just out of the reach of sleep, and felt a slight twinge of annoyance that she had been so rudely disturbed. He jumped down from his perch and walked toward her as she climbed heavily to her feet and turned toward him, opening her mouth.

"Would you like to see the baby?" she asked him.

Absentmindedly rubbing her cold arms, Kagome waited as her companion appeared to consider this before he shrugged, as if to say it didn't matter to him. She just nodded and moved in the direction of the hut before a thought poked her.

She frowned. "You're not going to do any baby-killing, are you?" she asked him, picking her way down the overgrown path as he followed behind. She heard him snort.

"No," he told her.

"Good," she said.

They were silent for the rest of the short trip, and it seemed to Kagome that there was no time at all between the path and the hut, where Akiyama was standing in the doorway, holding his brand new baby boy.

Kagome felt her heart melt a little at the sight.

Then Akiyama passed the pup over to Kouga, who took his grandson in his arms and broke Kagome's heart just a little more.

She watched, suddenly feeling alien and out of place, a stranger again in this person's life. She knew that he had changed, was more mature, had a son, was no longer infatuated with her, but it took seeing him with the little baby that was part of his family, actually descended from him, for her to realize, with a force so heavy she felt her breath leave her body, that he had moved on.

He probably hadn't thought of her in years. She was no longer important. She was just a side character in his life, a strange girl who hadn't aged, who hadn't grown, and he had moved on while she stayed anchored in place.

Kagome wavered, her feet itching to carry her somewhere that she could not go.

She could feel Sesshoumaru behind her, knew his silver hair tossed in the wind, knew his golden eyes watched her, but she didn't have the courage to turn and face him.

Instead she stayed right where she was, unable to move between a past and a future, each indistinguishable from the other.

by
Resmiranda

Chapter Twenty-Two

I range the fields with pensive tread,
And pace the hollow rooms
And feel (companion of the dead)
I'm living in the tombs.
-- Abraham Lincoln, "Memory"

* * *

When Kagome awoke the next morning she found that the air had turned balmy in the night. Unfortunately the benevolent turn in the weather coupled with the sun climbing in the sky meant that she was sweating beneath the heavy fur, and to add injury to insult her muscles were so sore that she could feel them sliding grittily over one another with even the most simple of movements. Emitting a slight groan and feeling incredibly disgusting as her slimy skin brushed the inside of her clothes, she turned over and pressed her hands to the ground in an attempt to sit up.

She immediately regretted the attempt as sharp pain lanced through her palms and up her arms. She couldn't stifle the cry that escaped her as she went crashing to her forearms. What the -

Oh right. The baby.

Kagome rolled over on her back and kicked the heavy fur away - the muscles that usually laid so peacefully on the tops of her thighs screaming in protest - before bringing her hands to her face and inspecting the damage left by Machiko's teeth. Sure enough, across the lower part of her thumbs - the fleshy mound that shored up the valley of her palm against her fingers - were little crescent moons in blue, purple, and green. Flipping her hands over she saw the mark of Machiko's upper teeth overlapping the back of her hand, mirror images of each other. Quietly, Kagome wondered what had possessed her to offer her hand to the hime to bite down on, but in the heat of the moment it was probably the only thing she had.

Gingerly she pressed her fingers against the bruise on her right hand, hissing when the pain, sudden and aching like the blade of a dull knife, ignited again.

Ow, she thought sullenly. Then, because it didn't seem sufficient to simply think it, she said it out loud.

"Ow."

There. That made her feel slightly better. Kagome supposed that she should feel even better because the baby was healthy and alive, but she had apparently sacrificed her hands for it, and she had liked her hands. Sure, she bit the nails or sometimes cut them while she was chopping onions, and they were extremely resistant to learning how to draw and could never thread a needle, but that didn't mean they deserved this kind of abuse.

Might be time to trade them in for a new model, she mused.

Absentmindedly, Kagome wondered how one went about filing a claim for new hands from the universe; after all, surely the universe owed her something, what with her saving the world and all that one time. Really, it was all so very inconvenient.

And she was still tired, too. She huffed grouchily as she swung her arms forward, letting the momentum carry her into a sitting position, then bent her knees and rested her forehead against them, letting her newly technicolor hands rest on the ground at her sides. She closed her eyes and tried not to think about how hot she was, or how much she wanted to go home and how much she wanted to stay. She listened to her breath as it slid over her lips and into the hollow created by her folded body.

"Oi."

Kagome didn't even bother to look up. "Not now, Kouga," she said. "I'm not really in the mood to talk to anyone. I'm busy."

"You don't look busy," Kouga said. She could hear his feet shifting on the dirt and the dead grass and wondered what he was doing. Not that she had the energy to lift her head and find out.

"Well I am. I am very busy," she repeated.

"Doing what?"

Feeling sorry for myself, she thought, but out loud she answered, "I'm faxing this report." She hoped that was nonsensical enough to keep his brain occupied while she tried to sink back into an aching sleep, though knowing her luck she would fall over, or, at the very least, wake up with a sore neck. Though a sore neck would

definitely complete her collection of sore body parts. Then she'd have the whole set.

Kouga didn't answer for a long minute, and Kagome thought she might have earned some peace and quiet for once. Sadly, t was not to be.

"Okay," he said dubiously, "but dog-breath said you might want a bath, and there's a hot spring a few miles away."

Kagome considered this, reflecting that she was so tired and sore that she probably would not have moved if the forest was on fire, nor even if there was a harem of sexy men - all with long, pretty hair, her mind supplied gratuitously - sprawled on a pile of money not ten feet away from her. But a bath... that might be worth dying for.

She lifted her head to see Kouga grinning down at her and she noticed the laugh lines around his eyes branched backwards over his temples, reaching almost to his hairline. In her breast, she felt a slow ache spread, but it was a familiar sensation now, and there didn't seem to be any point in dwelling on it. No one else seemed to do so, after all.

Kouga knelt down in front of her and gently took her wrists in his own hands before rising again.

"Ready?" he asked her.

She nodded, and he carefully pulled her into a standing position before lifting her into his arms and bolting into action.

Now that she had time to think about it, it seemed strange to be held by him again. Kagome reflected absently that at one point the pressure of his hands against the backs of her thighs and cradling her ribs would have made her feel... not aroused, but just a little more sensual than normal. Though of course that had been back when she was only fifteen and had never even been kissed by a boy - much less been held so intimately - but still. She no longer felt sensual, only comforted.

He looks like someone's father, she thought. I mean, he is, but he looks the part, too. That was probably it. Paternity wasn't very sexy, she supposed as she let her head fall against his shoulder, enjoying the feel of the wind in her hair.

She must have dozed off, for she felt her muscles - ow - jerk in surprise when Kouga skidded to a stop, and she blinked sleepily as he set her down. She thought she might just take another nap, but when her eyes alighted on the little pool of water before them, her torpor evaporated.

The spring wasn't large, but it was good enough. With a little cry of joy Kagome kicked off her shoes and peeled her tabi from her feet - they were so dirty that they had become stiff with sweat and the dust of the roads and mountains - before hobbling to a bush and casting a look back at the wolf, who grinned.

"Aw," he said, "you don't want me sticking around? You don't look that bad, you know."

Scowling, she rolled up a stinking sock and threw it at him. He batted it away with a laugh.

"All right, all right," he said with the air of one who is granting a favor, "if you're that shy I'll go away. I'll be back though, so don't take too long."

"Sure, sure," she muttered from behind the bush, her sore hands already working the knot at her waist, eager to be rid of her hakama and her haori. She heard Kouga give a snort, but she didn't bother to answer it, and when she peeked back over the top of the bush, he was gone and she was alone.

Kagome heaved a sigh of relief and stripped her clothes off. She briefly regretted her lack of clothing changes as her current outfit had definitely seen better, cleaner days, but there wasn't any use griping about that. Dipping a toe into the warm water she found, to her delight, that it was the perfect temperature, and without further preamble eased herself as steadily as possible into the spring.

The water crept up over her sticky skin, and she could feel it lifting the muck and grime of her journey from her body. She would have to remember to thank Sesshoumaru for the suggestion -

She drew up short and frowned. With deliberate care she began to splash water over her shoulders and ran her hands over her abdomen to slough off the dirt, but her mind was beginning to poke her with a very uncomfortable thought.

Did he suggest this because I smell bad?

Damn inu-youkai! Kagome couldn't remember any other time when she had been so paranoid about her scent. Even when she was traveling with Inuyasha it didn't seem to be much of a problem, but now that she was hanging out with the youkai lord who was always white and pristine -

- a vision of Sesshoumaru, red and gray with bits of dragon in his hair flashed across her mind -

- unless he absolutely couldn't help it, she felt rather dull and dirty.

Angrily Kagome splashed her face with water and tried to scrub away her sudden inferiority complex. At least Inuyasha had taken the same relaxed attitude toward bathing that most people in this era did, but she wasn't positive Sesshoumaru could get dirty without a concerted effort. It seemed very unfair.

On the other hand, why did she care? There was probably some deep-seated psychological reason that made her want to be at least presentable around him; after all, everyone wanted to look pleasing to beautiful members of the opposite sex, didn't they? Even if they were childish, emotionally stunted jerks? Of course.

Stupid psyche, she thought. Stupid psyche with its stupid complexes and stupid, stupid subconscious and weird Freudian... things...

Setting her jaw in resolve, Kagome shoved this line of thought from her mind, for it was sure to lead only to places she didn't want to go. Sesshoumaru was just going to have to deal with the fact that she was a human being, and human beings collected dirt like rats collected bubonic plague.

Ew. Plague. And rats.

She really was tired. Kagome sighed as she ran her fingernails down the trough behind her ears, scooping out the dirt that had settled there, and wished for the five thousand six hundred and twenty-sixth time that her backpack hadn't been melted. She could really use the shampoo that she had packed. And the soap. And especially a new pair of panties. When she got home she would have to throw this pair out, not only because they were dirty, but also because she was sure that she would go into post-traumatic shock if she ever saw them again. Briefly Kagome envisioned herself opening up her dresser drawers, having a flashback, and then dropping into a catatonic coma - or convulsions, or whatever the

symptoms of post-traumatic shock were - at the sight of her panties.

She giggled and began to rub her skin with the flat of her nails, scraping off the grime. When I get home, she thought, I'm never going to think of this whole debacle ever again. It couldn't possibly be good for my mental health.

Well, maybe she would remember Kouga, and she would remember Myouga. She was positive she would remember Sesshoumaru, and if she saw Miroku or San -

Kagome stilled beneath the water. She'd almost forgotten to ask Kouga about her friends! Stupid, stupid, she berated herself, how could you forget them?

I've been a little occupied, she guiltily snapped at her conscience. She was vaguely aware that holding conversations with herself was not the most sane of activities, but after recent events she felt a little crazy anyway.

It's not like I wanted to forget about them. I want to see them again.

I think.

It wouldn't be the same as it was with Kouga. This time she would be prepared for the fact that they had moved past her; they were her family here. They would be older, but they would still be themselves, like Kouga was still himself, even though he was more mature. It would be fine. There would be hugs, and kisses, and tears --

Troubled, Kagome finished scrubbing her skin before leaning back and dipping her hair in the water, running her fingers through it and finding only tangles. She winced, pulling at it for a full five minutes before she sighed with defeat - the

universe didn't want her to have presentable hair, and she didn't have the energy to argue with the universe - and climbed out onto the dry grass.

She was a little chilly, but she was truly clean for the first time in weeks, and she sighed in grateful contentment as she slid back into her dry, sun-warmed clothes. As she tied her hakama back into place and ruefully pulled her stiff socks - which were probably permanently molded into the shape of her feet - over her toes, she heard Kouga's distant shout, warning her of his approach in case she should be indecent.

Kagome listened to his rapidly approaching feet and frowned. Now that she was finally fully awake, she was beginning to notice something slightly different about today.

Where's Sesshoumaru? She hadn't seen him upon waking, and this was the first day in almost two weeks that she had opened her eyes and not seen him. Did I really smell that bad? She sighed with annoyance, trying to ignore the little stab of pain at such a dismissal, when Kouga slid to a stop in front of her and grinned. For some reason, that made her hurt more.

"Hey there," he said, putting his hands on his hips and flashing his old, devilish grin, "ready to go back?"

Stiffly, she nodded. She thought she saw a flicker of concern in his face, but it was gone as soon as she had spotted it. With rough care Kouga strode over to her and scooped her up again before taking off down the little path back to the village.

Kagome leaned against his shoulder, feeling the coarse fur he wore prickle against her temple, and tried to quash the faint feeling of rejection that had settled over her heart. It was probably one of the most irrational emotions she had ever experienced, so in addition to the whisper-soft sensation of insecurity she was

also angry with herself. What was wrong with her? She just hadn't seen him this morning - it wasn't like he'd cut her out of the will or something.

No, she probably felt this way because she would be leaving soon. Soon. She wanted to return home where women didn't have babies in crude huts and where soap was easily procured. Yet there were the things she would miss, the things she tried not to think about but did anyway. The things she missed were always with her, their bulk welling up beneath the ocean of thought, changing the tides.

There was a time when she would have entertained the fanciful idea of staying forever in the past, but there was so little left of the places and people who had meant so much to her that remaining would have become more of a half-life than the one she had in her own time. There was nothing left for her here except memories; she had discharged her duty, and there was no reason to stay, no reason to injure her heart any more than it already was. Yet spending her remaining time apart from the people she cared for seemed wasteful, as though she were standing on a cliff and merrily throwing each precious minute into the wind and watching as they whipped away, never to be found again.

She needed to ask Kouga now, or risk losing her last chance to see her friends, but when she tried to speak she found that she was almost caught and frozen in place. Why did her tongue lay heavy, like granite, in her mouth? It was so hard to move she was almost surprised that it didn't clack against her teeth.

"Kouga," she finally said. Her voice was grainy, and she tried to clear her throat.

"Hm?" he said, looking down at her, and there was definitely concern in his eyes. Her mouth twisted.

"Kouga, do you know what happened to..." She paused, as if delaying the question would mitigate whatever pain she might encounter in the answer. She

thought that perhaps, if she didn't ask, then the deaths or illnesses or sorrows that were merely an abstract maybe at the moment would never solidify into a very real yes.

Kagome licked her lips, and took the step she dreaded to take. "...do you know what happened to Sango and Miroku? Do you know where Shippou is?"

In the world after the question, there seemed to be only silence.

She felt her heart freeze in its labor when she saw his face melt into pity.

"I am sorry Kagome," he said gently, as the blood drained from her head, "but I do not know where Shippou is."

She heard herself gasp with disappointment and Kouga suddenly looked pained. "But I do know what happened to the monk and the taiji-ya," he told her quickly.

She closed her eyes, not knowing if she wanted to know the answer. Miroku, grin and hand and wise fool and Sango, fiery and guarded and sister -

"They were married," Kouga said, and she let her breath out in a rush as something unwound in her stomach.

"Oh, god," she muttered, and Kagome suddenly felt warm. The blood had returned, was pricking her cheeks with color.

"I know that they settled down after a while in a village to the south of here, and they exterminated demons together for a living."

"Did they have children?" The question popped out of her mouth. "Are they still... still..."

The wolf slowed to a stop, and Kagome looked up to see that they had arrived back at the clearing. She hadn't even noticed. Turning her face back to his, she waited for him to hear the question she was asking.

As if she were breakable - and maybe she was - Kouga set her feet on the ground and helped her stand.

"They had many children," he said quietly, "and Sango is alive."

She heard what he didn't say, dangling from his voice like a half-amputated limb, and her vision became blurred, softening the world and obscuring the anxious sympathy that graced his features. Only when she blinked did she feel the feather-light fall of tears against her cheek.

But Miroku is gone, she finished.

It didn't seem right. One should never have to be without the other.

Kagome swallowed around the thick, spiny lump in her throat and clenched her fists so hard she thought she would draw blood; heedless of her injuries, she felt a ragged lance of pain shoot through her arms as the world melted again.

"Where can I find her?" she asked him. She blinked once more, clearing her eyes of tears so that she could see his face.

His jaw hardened. "Do you think that's wise - " he began.

Kagome whirled away from him, her heart strangled in her chest, and began to walk. Not to anywhere, but from him and his misplaced concern. Miroku was dead, and she needed some time alone to think before she went to see Sango. She stared at the ground and watched it move beneath her, wondering where she would end up as she passed into the forest. High above, the naked branches criss-crossing against each other cast sharp shadows on the ground, and the balmy air dried the tracks of her tears on her skin as Kagome tried to slip out from beneath the past that laid against her so heavily.

* * *

Myouga perched contentedly on his lord's shoulder, meditating as best he could and enjoying the lovely air for once. However, he was feeling vaguely worried about his master, who seemed to be rather preoccupied today, and even - and this was the strange part – slightly anxious. No one else would notice it, but Myouga could feel the tiny little electric jerks coursing down the demon lord's nerves to rest in his muscles in the form of minute twitches. It was almost putting him on edge.

The old flea sighed wearily and did his best to relax, despite his master's jumpiness.

For his part Sesshoumaru unconsciously balanced precariously on his narrow branch and wondered what was taking her so long to finish bathing. Dimly he remembered that the older Rin grew, the more time she spent grooming, but to the best of his knowledge she had never spent this long to complete what should be a simple task. Perhaps she was washing her clothes as well?

Perhaps she lingered because she did not want to set out again so soon? Perhaps she drowned?

His claws twitched involuntarily. Sesshoumaru frowned and lifted them to his face, scowling as he inspected them with a critical eye, as if he could discern the reason why they seemed to be developing a mind of their own lately. Nothing seemed amiss, so he laid them back in his lap. He kept an eye on them, though. Just in case they tried anything funny.

Where was she?

"Oi," came the voice of Kouga from beneath him. Sesshoumaru considered for a moment and then decided that he was not feeling particularly diplomatic this morning. He declined to answer. Maybe if he pretended that he couldn't hear Kouga, Kouga would think the same thing.

There was a pause. "Oi!" the wolf said, slightly louder this time, impatience edging through the sound.

Sesshoumaru closed his eyes.

For a moment he thought the wolf was going to go away and leave him in peace, but then he felt something begin to poke him insistently in the leg. He was almost afraid to find out what it was. Opening his eyes again, he leaned over and turned his scowl on Kouga, who was grinning and apparently having a wonderful time poking him with the scabbard of his sword. Sesshoumaru did not find this nearly as amusing as Kouga apparently did.

"That," he informed the wolf as haughtily as possible, "is entirely unnecessary."

"Just wanted to know if you were awake or not," Kouga replied, unfazed. Carelessly he slid his sword back into place.

"And now that you have this information, what are you going to do with it?" Sesshoumaru asked.

Kouga grinned again, though Sesshoumaru thought it looked a little strained. "I'm going to talk to you. But not very much!" he said quickly when the youkai lord closed his eyes in a mute plea to the heavens.

"Very well," Sesshoumaru said, hoping this would not take long. They had a journey to begin.

"Kagome's upset."

Sesshoumaru shifted his position and closed his eyes again. "That is none of my concern," he informed the wolf. And it was none of his concern, though he couldn't help but feel that he was lying.

Kouga seemed to think so as well, because the jaded snort he gave was so loud Sesshoumaru thought it a wonder his empty head did not collapse in on itself. Thankfully he did not further deign to comment on his disbelief. "She wants to see her old friends before she goes home, so it does concern you," he said instead.

Her old companions? Ah, the monk and the huntress. Sesshoumaru was silent, turning this new gem of information over in his mind.

Kouga cleared his throat. "Only one of them is still alive that I know of. She told me she still wanted to see her, and I said that might not be a good idea, and she got all... female on me."

Sesshoumaru cracked an eye. He was not sure what "getting female" might entail as Kagome was certainly one already, but it probably had something to do with the strange transgressions men always seemed to make and involved storming off in a whirlwind of wounded emotions. That was definitely typical female behavior. He had not seen her exhibit it before, but it stood to reason that she would do so occasionally.

He watched as Kouga's face became slightly tinged with red, clearly embarrassed, before frowning. "So," he said, squaring his shoulders, and Sesshoumaru could see him mentally brushing off the slight guilt he no doubt felt, "you should go talk to her about it. You're the one hanging around so she doesn't get hurt and all, so you'll have to go with her." With that announcement the wolf turned and stalked away.

Inwardly, Sesshoumaru sighed. On the one hand this was yet another detour, but on the other hand he didn't think he was ready to go back to the House of the Moon to immerse himself once more in the stultifying work that still waited for him there, and that had no doubt multiplied in his absence. For the briefest of moments he felt a flash of nostalgia for the time when he was still gathering his power to him in order to take back the lands left to him after his father's death. It hadn't been more than half a year after Naraku had been defeated when he had once again tied himself to the land, and freedom was the price he paid for power. It was not surprising that his father had found the same restrictions so onerous that he had been forced to leave for extended periods of time to preserve his sanity. Thinking back to his childhood Sesshoumaru remembered that his father did, occasionally, venture out under the auspices of 'maintenance' of the land; now that he was lord in his father's stead, he understood why.

Would it hurt to be gone for a few more days? But he had probably been gone too long already, he realized almost guiltily; the moon had cycled twice since he had left.

With a huff of annoyance Sesshoumaru tried to decide what to do. Unfortunately, after a few minutes he felt a headache begin to form, so in lieu of deciding the proper course of action he instead decided that he would simply act as a true lord of the land should act and foist the job off onto someone else.

Sesshoumaru lifted his hand. "Myouga," he said sharply, pleased that he had finally thought of a way to force the flea into some modicum of usefulness.

Myouga jumped, eyes snapping open. He was not used to having slept so much and he felt like his head was full of cobwebs, but at the sound of Sesshoumaru's voice he felt the dust blow away and his heart sink. He hadn't been squashed yet today, but that could easily change.

Fervently he hoped that Sesshoumaru had forgotten all about that as he hopped down to rest in Sesshoumaru's outstretched palm and cleared his throat.

"Yes, milord?" he said, trying to keep the little quiver out of his voice.

His old heart nearly stopped when the demon scowled down at him, but that feeling was quickly banished with what he said next.

"Go home," Sesshoumaru said.

There was a pause as Myouga readjusted his internal trajectory to accommodate this sudden but cryptic change in fortune. When it became apparent that Sesshoumaru was not going to clarify his command, he shuffled uncomfortably. "Erm," Myouga ventured. "Why?"

The scowl deepened. "I have been away for too long, and I will be even longer.

Go see to things, and make sure all is ready for my return," he said imperiously before turning his face away from the old retainer and staring off into space, a clear dismissal.

Myouga shifted again. He had not heard his lord's voice with such sharp edges since they had left home; it was strange to hear it again. He looked up, wondering what Sesshoumaru was thinking.

Sesshoumaru shot a look at him out of the corner of his eye, and Myouga jumped into action; he did not get as old as he was without some instinct for survival. "Of course, milord!" he said, "I shall depart right away!"

The flea turned and crouched, preparing to jump when Sesshoumaru's voice arrested him again.

"And Myouga - "

Here comes the squishing. I knew he hadn't forgotten, Myouga thought morosely before turning.

There was a slight twitch on Sesshoumaru's lips. " - don't mess everything up," he finished.

"Hmph!" Myouga exclaimed in relief, pretending to be offended. "I would never!" He turned and hopped away, not returning his lord's smile until he was well into the forest.

He wondered if Sesshoumaru knew how much had he looked like his father in that moment.

* * *

"Kagome."

Kagome opened her eyes and stared at the tree across from her.

It was a nice tree, and she was willing to bet the tree she was sitting on was also nice, but that didn't change the fact that their roots were bruising her in places entirely unmentionable; it had almost been enough to make her turn back to the campsite until she remembered that she was sulking.

She was mad at Kouga for questioning her impulse to go to Sango. He was a jerk. A sensible, caring jerk, who only wanted the best for her.

What a jerk.

Now it seemed he'd sent an even bigger jerk - one who couldn't even say good morning to her - to drag her back, so Kagome refused to turn around and acknowledge him. Sulking seemed so much more effective. What she was hoping to accomplish by it was a complete mystery, but damned if it wasn't working.

Kagome crossed her arms and sniffed. She was feeling depressed, and Sesshoumaru had not helped any by avoiding her and telling her that she stank, so she was feeling miffed at him as well. He was so rude.

"Kagome," he said again.

She wished he would stop saying her name. It was so considerate of him to call her by her name rather than by 'miko' that she felt petty and mean when she ignored him.

What a jerk.

She turned. "Yes?" she said as icily as she could. It must have been a passable attempt because she thought she saw his eyes widen just a fraction. He didn't answer for a moment, appearing to size her up.

Sesshoumaru stared at her and almost took a step back at the tone of her voice. He had seen her angry, upset, happy, tired, frightened, and content, but he had never seen her be cold. It was just so… well, like him, and if there was one thing in the world that she was not like, it was himself. Her behavior was entirely incongruous and it made him nervous, though he'd rather endure her annoying mood-swings than let her see his confusion.

He kept his customary boredom on his face as he answered. "We will be leaving soon for your companion's village," he told her calmly. "You should say your goodbyes as we will not be returning here."

As he spoke he watched her face, and was astonished to find her frowning even more, her lower lip trembling dangerously as though she were about to cry.

Females, he thought with slight guilt and much exasperation. Wasn't this what she had wanted?

For her part, Kagome was having the unpleasant experience of executing a complete one-eighty in mood despite considerable momentum. Okay, that was unexpected, she thought, off-balance and, she suspected, slightly overwrought. That was... was...

She didn't know what it was. She had been working herself into a miserable froth for almost a quarter of an hour now and she had been hoping to take it out on someone, yet now her circumstances had changed completely and all her melancholy anger was wasted. The petty part of her did feel slightly cheated, but really she was just ashamed.

"We're going to see Sango?" she said, deflating, strangely sad. For a moment she wondered why he would go out of his way like this - after all, the quest was over - but in the end decided that it would probably be unwise to ask lest he explore his motives and reconsider.

He only nodded, but it was good enough for her. Briefly, doubt flashed across her mind, but she quickly banished it; after all, was this not the only thing she had really wanted to do since she had leapt into the past to follow a fairytale?

This was the one selfish desire in which she had allowed herself to indulge, and suddenly it was hers for the taking.

He was already walking away. Painfully she rose to her feet, and, turning, she followed him, watching his long, silvery hair sway beneath the grasping shadows of the trees.

When they arrived back in the clearing, Kouga was already there, looking apologetic.

"I'm sorry - " he began, but she cut him off.

"It's all right. I just..." Kagome paused. Why is it so hard to speak today? "Um... I just have to say goodbye," she finished.

"Oh really?" he replied, raising an eyebrow, straining to be lighthearted. "You didn't say goodbye last time. Are you sure?"

Kagome just sighed, suddenly feeling tired again. Kouga took the hint.

He cleared his throat. "Akiyama's gone hunting, but would you like to say goodbye to Machiko?" he asked gently.

Say goodbye to her? she thought quietly. That's not a bad idea. I wonder how she's doing.

Mutely she nodded her head in assent as she turned to walk the short distance to the hut where the hime - the girl who had brought her back here and made her strange journey possible - rested and recovered from her ordeal. As she wove through the trees, Kagome hoped that she wouldn't come back to find Sesshoumaru and Kouga fighting again, though the thought was enough to put a small but welcome smile on her lips.

The hut was quiet and cozy when she entered, so different from the way it had been last night. When her eyes found Machiko Kagome blushed a little, noticing the baby suckling at her breast, but she quickly squashed her embarrassment. The reaction seemed almost archaic, as if a great deal of time had passed between yesterday and today though in truth it hadn't even been twenty-four hours since Machiko had gone into labor. Kagome smiled at the girl and paced quietly across the floor to settle down next to the bed where the two rested.

"Miko-sama," Machiko said, returning the smile, though she was clearly tired. She seemed so different from the flighty idiot Kagome had met two weeks ago.

"How are you?" Kagome asked quietly, not wanting to disturb the little boy

sucking lustily at his mother's breast. Almost envious of the infant, she wondered when the last time she had ever felt that kind of enthusiasm had been. She couldn't quite remember.

"I am doing well," the hime replied, drawing Kagome's eyes away from her son and to her face. Kagome found herself rocked by the strange depth she saw there and looked away.

"Where's - um. Where's Yukiko?" she asked stiffly.

She could hear the smile in Machiko's voice. "I think she is in the village bullying someone into giving us fresh blankets."

A faint, slightly regretful smile tugged at the corners of Kagome's mouth as she thought of this before Machiko broke the quiet, causing her to meet the hime's eyes.

"I cannot thank you enough," she said.

Kagome hesitated, and then shook her head. "There's no need to thank me," she told the girl. "It was my duty."

The girl looked away and was quiet for a moment before she replied. "Aki - Akiyama - " she seemed to stumble over the unfamiliar name, Kagome noted distantly " - told me that you and youkai-sama journeyed far to help me. That surely was not your intention."

No. Not really. Though now that she was thinking on it she was entirely uncertain as to whether or not she would do it over again. There were things she would not have gained if she had not undertaken the task. Shifting uncomfortably Kagome looked down at her hands and noticed that she was

unconsciously rubbing her thumbs over her scars.

I will never see her again, she thought, trying to make it real.

I will never know if they will be happy. I will never find out what happens after this. I will never be able to come back.

I will carry these scars all my life.

Kagome was silent for a long moment, letting her fingertips trail lightly over the newly tight, textured skin, and bit her lip.

"It was my happy obligation," she finally said. "I could not do otherwise."

A small hand darted across her lap and grabbed her fingers as though to still the restlessness, and Kagome looked up into wide, sympathetic eyes - dark and kind and suddenly wiser than her own.

The hime smiled sweetly.

"You'll be all right," she said, as if she knew.

Kagome thought she might cry.

Then Machiko released her hands and went back to tending her son, softly stroking his tiny ears with one slender finger. If she hadn't seen the infant actually come into the world, Kagome would have never believed that a girl so petite could give birth to such a large child.

The hime sighed. "Please tell youkai-sama that I am sorry. I can only say that I have not been myself."

For a moment Kagome was lost, until she remembered that Sesshoumaru had reluctantly mentioned an... incident. She nodded weakly. "Um..." she said, "I will tell him, but can I ask why?" It sounded inane, but she couldn't think of anything else to say.

The hime didn't answer, just stared at the baby in her arms. Then she said, voice so low that Kagome had to lean in to hear her, "If you thought you were going to die, you would not have wanted to be unloved either."

Kagome looked away from her in shame, regretting all the uncharitable thoughts she had ever had. "All right," she replied quietly.

Machiko just smiled again, still fondling her son's furry ears.

There didn't seem to be anything else to say, so Kagome rose and dusted imaginary debris from her hakama before looking at the hime, wrapped inside the maternal world made only from herself and her son.

"Farewell," Machiko said, not looking up.

"Farewell," Kagome replied softly, and exited.

Kouga was sitting on a fallen log and staring at nothing in particular when she returned, and didn't seem to notice her approach. Sesshoumaru was nowhere to be seen, presumably finding some convenient excuse - or, knowing him, wandering away without explanation - to give them some privacy.

Kouga did not acknowledge her presence. After a moment Kagome coughed softly, nervously, to catch his wayward attention.

Kouga's head snapped up and he looked at her for a second, eyes wide and startled as though he did not recognize her, before his face - the one that she did and did not remember - melted into a smile that didn't reach his eyes. "You leaving?" he asked, and Kagome fancied she could hear the words beneath the words, the ones that went unspoken, the ones that everyone heard but never acknowledged.

You are leaving. It was the same as the question, but it meant so much more. It was a fact. There was a heavy knowledge in it, an endlessness, a neverness that could not be expressed in speech.

Her heart hurt. "Yeah," she answered shakily.

Yes.

She saw him swallow as he slowly stood and walked over to her. He stopped only a hands breadth away and looked down into her face, searchingly. Kagome wondered if, in the curve of her features, he could see all her forgotten secrets, buried so deep she could not remember they even existed, and if he could, she wondered if he would tell her all the secrets she had kept even from herself.

A shadow passed beneath his eyes and was gone.

"Have a good journey," he said, the loyal, caring friend.

Be happy.

"I will."

I will try.

Then he put his arms around her, warm and strong and safe, and she buried her face against his shoulder as he laid his cheek against the top of her head.

"I'll miss you. Wish you could have stuck around longer," he said, and she heard his voice rumble through her, dragging behind it the tiny impotent anger and the enormous aching regret of forever.

This was not long enough.

"I'll miss you, too," she said, her words muffled as she spoke around the knot in her throat, "but I have to go, I guess."

It would never have been long enough to satisfy.

"I guess so." The end.

And this is how it is.

Dimly, Kagome wondered why she wasn't crying even though her eyes burned and she couldn't breathe from the weight of it all. Clenching her teeth, she hugged him fiercely, as if she could impress him forever on herself, so she could carry him with her, so that she would never be lonely again.

Then Kouga drew back slowly and Kagome released her hold on him with such reluctance that she almost didn't realize how close he was until he tangled one hand in her hair and softly pressed his lips to her cheek.

Kagome closed her eyes.

"Goodbye," he whispered in her ear.

"Goodbye," she echoed back.

Then Kouga turned, his tail swishing behind him, and walked into the woods.

She watched him go.

When Sesshoumaru strolled back into the campsite after what he felt was a decent interval for a farewell, he found her perched on a log, the heavy fur that she used as a blanket slung over her shoulder, and smiling brightly. The sight brought him to a halt. He blinked.

"Ready to go?" she chirped.

Sesshoumaru blinked again before inhaling surreptitiously, not trusting her face.

Sure enough, she was tinged with the scent of sadness that smelled like grey skies and dying trees; it made him ache a little to draw it in. She was hiding the emptiness after the goodbye beneath her smile, as if erasing it from her face would erase it from her mind as well.

Sesshoumaru knew the value of hiding. She did not want to be seen, and he was not going to force her to unmask herself.

He nodded in response to her question before turning and kneeling. She climbed onto his back - he thought she felt hollow - and he tossed his hair over her before tensing and taking to the air.

She was quiet for a long time as they flew low over the land, though with each breath she drew - her mouth was so close to his throat that he could feel, very faintly, each exhalation - the smell of her sorrow lessened a bit more, and after a while he allowed himself to relax into her normal scent as it grew larger and larger. It was maybe an hour from sundown when the sadness was almost banished, and she was enough of herself to speak.

"Where's Myouga?" she asked. He couldn't see her face, but he knew she was frowning a little, only the slightest of creases in her brow and a puzzled look in her eyes. It was one of her more amusing expressions.

"I sent him back to the House of the Moon," he told her.

"Oh," she said softly. "I didn't get to say goodbye."

Sesshoumaru felt a flash of guilt - he should have thought of that - but he didn't know what to say.

Then she took a deep breath and shifted against him. He heard the sound of her clothes catching on his armor before she cleared her throat.

"So... your home really is called the House of the Moon?" she asked, sounding slightly incredulous, skipping over her regret.

He was mildly miffed. "Yes," he replied. "It is our ancestral home."

She shifted again. "I thought it was burned," she said quietly.

"It has been burned several times. I have rebuilt it twice, and it burned once under my reign," he informed her, only a little stiffly.

"Oh," she said.

Kagome settled again and wondered why in the world the fairytale she had read would get the name of his home right, but would get practically everything else wrong. It was as though someone had found the records of the real story, but felt that what had really happened didn't have enough pizzazz, so they spiced it up and switched it around and hey, presto, a story that only vaguely resembled actual events. Just like most of history. It was so annoying.

She sighed a little. "So why did you send him home?" she wondered. Maybe Kouga was right. Maybe it was better to not say goodbye.

Beneath her hands he shrugged slightly. "I have been away for a while. I decided to send him back to make sure things were in order for my return."

"Oh," she said again. "I'm sorry."

"For what?" he asked, seemingly genuinely puzzled.

"Um... for keeping you from your duties?"

She heard him laugh, sharp and humorless. "I assure you, it is not a burden to be kept from them."

Even though he couldn't see her, Kagome grinned. She let her chin fall to his shoulder and watched the landscape for a while, until she remembered something.

"By the way," her voice came from over his shoulder, snapping him out of the vague reverie into which he had fallen, "I'm quite angry with you. Just so you know."

This did not sound promising. "Indeed?" he asked warily. "Why is that?"

"You didn't see me this morning," she said, letting herself settle a little lower on his back, away from him. She had forgotten her hurt in the greater sadness of farewell, but now that they were on the road again it had come back to her and she was feeling rather peevish about it. She had thought it was just a byproduct of saying goodbye, but now that she was thinking of it again it felt even worse. It was difficult to describe why her feelings were hurt so badly, but it had something to do with trust. Kagome thought if she were forced to explain she would describe it as akin to the feeling that she would get were she to wake up, at age fifteen in the Sengoku Jidai, and find Inuyasha gone. It left her naked and alone.

Reflecting that he surely did not deserve this, Sesshoumaru frowned. "I was unaware that I was supposed to," he replied.

Well. Now that she thought about it that way, he'd never signed a contract. Damn!

Kagome scowled, tripping gracefully into her next grievance. "And you can tell me if I stink," she added, peeking over his shoulder again, though she did not

look at him, instead opting to study the terribly interesting trees that were passing by beneath their feet.

Sesshoumaru waited, hoping she would clarify this statement, but she was silent.

He cast about. "You do not?" he finally replied. He sounded uncertain.

"Well I don't now," she told him. "But thanks for the suggestion of a bath. It was appreciated."

She did not sound very appreciative to him. "Rest assured that when your odor is offensive, I will let you know," he informed her. "The suggestion was merely for your comfort."

There was a pause. "My comfort?" she asked as though she had not heard him.

He frowned. "I am not in the habit of repeating myself."

There was a long silence.

"Oh," she finally said. "Thank you."

Sesshoumaru declined to answer, feeling a headache begin to bloom behind his eyes.

He sighed. He had thought he understood her, though looking back, he was uncertain as to why he would think such a ridiculous thing, but then again she might, perhaps, be feeling a little stressed today. Either way, it didn't matter,

as he seemed to have said the proper thing to defuse the situation. He tried to refocus on the task at hand.

"So how long before we reach them?" she asked lightly, suddenly.

He seized upon the distraction and calculated in his head for a moment before answering. "We'll stop for the night, and we'll reach the village by tomorrow evening."

"Okay," she said, settling against him again, though he heard the brittle undertone in her voice. He wondered why she should want to make herself so unhappy.

He did not ask. Instead they flew onwards, toward the final stop of their long, strange journey, each of them drifting in their own silent thoughts.

* * *

The sun was near setting, and Kagome glanced anxiously at the horizon, searching for the village where Sango lived. Her stomach was tying itself in knots - it burned like it had been washed in acid - and she hadn't eaten anything except a few sips of water for fear that she would revisit it later.

Her companion had been mostly silent today, answering her in monosyllabic grunts except when she asked him what the hell was wrong with him, which he didn't answer at all. It bugged her to no end.

On the other hand, she had awoken that morning beneath a tree and he had been sitting next to her, propped against the trunk, so she didn't complain too

much and left him to his own thoughts. He deserved a little peace and quiet after spending over a month in her company, and she was happy to give him whatever space he needed since it seemed that was the only thing she could do for him.

Sesshoumaru felt her hands involuntarily convulse on his shoulders for the thousandth time and ground his teeth. Her anxiety - curling in his nose like sharp, orange stalagmites creeping over her normal scent - was making him anxious, and her happy front was making him moody as hell. Even worse, she was impossible to block from his nose, and therefore his mind; at least when he was nervous, he had the self-control to negate it, but he could do nothing about her.

He wondered why he had agreed to do this again; at the moment, even paperwork seemed preferable to her infectious apprehension.

When he smelled the cooking fires of a village up ahead Sesshoumaru allowed himself to growl in relief. The sun was sinking down, and high above clouds were shifting restlessly around the sky; he estimated that they would be at the home of her former companion by sunset.

Kagome, for her part, was feeling the first ticklings of fear, and the more the sun descended in the sky the more she wanted to bite something. Her own hand would have been ideal, but it was still injured, and biting Sesshoumaru was out of the question since he bit back, so in the end she settled for chewing viciously on her lower lip, training her entire mind on the mildly disgusting task of scraping off the chapped skin. She frowned as she fell into a pattern, rhythmically working her lip through her teeth.

"We will be there soon."

Startled out of her reverie Kagome bit down a little too hard.

"Ow!" she said. Another injury. "Damn," she said out loud, "as if I didn't have enough wrong with me."

She heard Sesshoumaru snicker at that. Shooting a glare at him that he could not see, she moodily sucked her lip into her mouth and waited for the bleeding to stop.

After a moment she released it, and he could feel her gearing up her courage.

"Where is her house?" she finally asked.

Sesshoumaru didn't answer for a second, and she was on the verge of asking him again when he made an indeterminate noise in the back of his throat. She could not discern its meaning, but forgot about it as he began to speak.

"Her house is the northernmost dwelling," he told her. "The wolf informed me that she remained a taiji-ya for years, so her home is shored against the forest where the most youkai live."

"Oh," Kagome said softly. "I didn't think she'd continue doing that."

Sesshoumaru raised a brow. "Why did you not?" he asked her. "I suspect that it is a rather lucrative occupation."

Her fingers twitched again. "I don't know," she replied. "I just thought that she might not... want to continue. After all the youkai she met that were - " she was about to say that were good, but she realized at the last second that it was a silly thing to say, " - that were not entirely evil."

He appeared to think for a moment.

"Hm," he said. "Perhaps."

"You don't seem very uncomfortable with the idea," Kagome told him, almost disapprovingly.

"You would prefer that I be uncomfortable?"

"No, I - "

"Taiji-ya do not frighten me," he said.

"I know," she replied quickly, worried that she had offended him.

"And I do not begrudge your companion her profession."

She found that curious. "Why not? She's killed a lot of youkai," Kagome said.

He did not reply immediately, so she stared down at the rich silk of his kimono beneath her fingers, and very lightly she traced over the seams of his collar, waiting for him to speak, trying to puzzle the answer for herself.

For a long, quiet moment, he said nothing, and she realized the reason a fraction of a second before he spoke.

"Yes. She has killed many youkai," he said distantly, and she didn't need to hear the rest to know what it was.

And I have killed many humans, he said to her with the words beneath the words.

It was strange to remember that, but what was even stranger was the dawning realization that it didn't seem to matter much any more. Perhaps that was a side-effect of outliving everyone - life became less.

She hoped not.

"There," he said, cutting a swathe through her sad contemplation, and she looked up from his shoulder to see a village at the edge of the forest beneath them.

Her heart sped up, though whether it was in panic or in excitement she couldn't say. Kagome felt stomach turn over, and she suddenly found it hard to breathe.

"You'll go with me?" she asked. Suddenly, it seemed so important to have him there, so important to be able to see his unchanged face. She needed him to anchor her to the earth, reassure her that she was real.

He didn't look at her. "Yes," he said quietly.

Then they were sinking further, skimming over the tops of the trees, and Kagome swallowed her heart as they touched down on the edge of the forest beneath the darkening sky.

Tales from the House of the Moon
by
Resmiranda

Chapter Twenty-Three

"Meeting is such sweet sorrow,
For someday we may have to part -
Hush, don't you make a sound,
You're going to let me down."
–Ben Harper, "Ashes"

* * *

It was growing cold again. Kagome could feel the previous days' warmth become laced with the snap of frost and ice; the chill traveled on the clouds welling overhead, blocking out the setting sun and the rising moon, and the smell of cooking fires curled in her nose as the pungent smoke rose and flattened against the grey sky until it was lost. No doubt there was a celestial fireworks display above the clouds, but here on the earth there was only the gathering gloom and the cold, dark whisper of the forest at their backs.

Sesshoumaru made almost no sound as he landed lightly in the dead and broken grass, his shoes flattening the brown stalks with only a murmur, and Kagome noted this fact giddily. She refused to think of anything other than what was happening at the moment, of the rough armor catching her skin, of his hands releasing her legs, of the way his hair slid over her bare fingers and against her clothes. She refused to look up, to see the house before her, to behold the place she had traveled so long and so far to find.

Should she lift her eyes and find Sango there, Kagome knew that she would have no choice but to run, but whether in running she would rush to meet her or rush to flee from her, she could not say.

She could feel her heart pounding against her breast, begging to be set free, as if it had endured enough already and could not take anything more, but she ignored it as she slowly slid down Sesshoumaru's back to touch down in the dead meadow.

The grasses shifted beneath her feet, crackling their corpses against each other. Absently, not at all trying to distract herself from what was happening, she wondered why she made so much noise and Sesshoumaru made so little. It didn't make sense that he should be quieter than she when he clearly weighed so much more.

Will she be happy to see me, like Kouga was?

The thought flashed through her mind as sunlight on a blade, and just as sharp. If she moved too quickly, she would cut herself.

Her blood was still pounding through her veins, and she had yet to lift her eyes from the dead grass beneath her shoes to the house of the taiji-ya, the sister she had left behind so long ago without even saying goodbye.

Will she be angry?

It fascinated her, the criss-cross of each blade crushed by her weight, the smell of winter emanating from the cold ground underneath, as if the world created the seasons with the warmth and cold of its heart; it was all so complex, so familiar, and yet she was in an unfamiliar place. She was a stranger who recognized the world around her, yet had never seen it before.

Long ago, they had tramped through dead fields together, avoiding snakes and lizards, sneezing from the dust kicked up by their feet, laughing together over silly things, complaining together over serious ones. She and Sango, dearest of friends, close as sisters, though they would probably not have been friends if they had met under other circumstances, in other times; Sango's somber air clashed with her own effervescence, the taiji-ya's sadness the too-heavy counterweight to the miko's innocence. So different, they touched each other through the shroud of tears that surrounded the shikon no tama, instead of through any shared ground, and now they were so far apart in life and in time that Kagome thought she could

feel the world separate, yawning wide between them.

Will she remember me?

Kagome closed her eyes.

Sesshoumaru waited, but she had still not moved from behind him, and he could smell fear. He turned to gaze at the young woman he had journeyed with for so long, and nearly stepped away from her. Breath hitching in surprise, he swept his gaze over her, taking in her bowed head, her clenched hands, her shaking legs, and it seemed so absurd. She had faced down a dragon, and now, now she was trembling in terror.

He frowned, eyes narrowing as he puzzled. She had been anxious, yes, but now he could hear her thundering heart and her shallow lungs strive to keep her standing, holding her in place in her panic, as though she were awaiting execution. Shuddering under the strain of conflicting impulses, Kagome was on the verge, teetering between confrontation and cowardice.

Balancing with her, Sesshoumaru thought about the world after the decision. Would she run, or would she stay? If she did the latter, would she find peace? And if she did the former, would he blame her?

She shuddered again, something primal rippling through her body before she raised her head to gaze up at him, wide eyes both terrified and anxious, both hating and needing, her longing almost as great as her panic.

They were here. Their goal sat a hundred feet away, and she shivered with fear.

"Are you ready?"

When his lips moved in the question, Kagome jumped. She hadn't really been looking at him, but he had been standing in front of her, blocking her view of the house, so she had trained her eyes on his face even though she didn't really see it. Sometimes he was so still that he faded against the backdrop of her mind, anyway, and that was probably what he wanted; now that he had jolted her out of her own head and reminded her that he existed she found it difficult to answer him

truthfully, but it would have been even harder to lie.

"No," she whispered.

He didn't move, didn't acknowledge her for a long moment. She saw him blink, as though thinking, and waited for him to pass judgment.

"Then," he finally said, "perhaps the only time is now?"

The sound that escaped her was more of a wheeze than anything resembling her normal full-throated chuckle or her whole-hearted laugh, but it was bitter, and it got the point across.

How is it, she thought, that you are the only one who knows?

Kagome swallowed. "I think so," she told him, nodding her head in short, sharp jerks, and he turned gracefully away from her to face the dip and rise of the slumbering meadow that lay before the house of Sango, the last of the hunters of the shikon no tama.

"Then let us proceed," he replied, voice low and strong, looking straight ahead.

She was finding it difficult to get enough air. "Yes," she choked out, feeling almost ashamed. She had been brave so many times before, but this was one of the hardest things she had ever had to face.

She knew that worse than the hated enemy was the abandoned friend, and that knowledge passed over her with blackened wings.

Sesshoumaru took one step forward and she followed, tripping just a little to catch up and overtake him - this was hers, after all - but halfway down the little incline of the meadow movement became unnecessary.

There was the bright bronze sound of something jangling, something familiar --

-- no, no, he's dead, I thought he was gone, no --

-- before the shoji screen slid back, and onto the porch stepped an old woman - stooped though her step was strong - and in one wizened hand she held Miroku's shakujou. Her long grey hair, bound low but still free, tossed in the wind of the coming chill, and her face was lined, not with her laughter, as Kouga's had been, but with her somber thoughts, with the melancholy severity that had always lived behind her bright eyes. Kagome could see, beneath the layer of years, the girl who had always had the eyes of an old woman, even when she was young; she could see the girl who had died one too many times.

She had thought that perhaps she would not recognize her, but even without her husband's holy staff, Kagome would have known Sango anywhere.

There was no sound, nothing between them. Kagome was only dimly aware of the overpowering presence of Sesshoumaru a mere step behind her; everything seemed to have faded. Her jaw moved and her lips parted, but her tongue was as sand, burying her words, and she didn't know what she should say anyway. Certain that she looked ridiculously like a dying fish, Kagome swallowed, forced her lungs to continue working, and waited for Sango's face to light up with recognition, withdraw in anger, or collapse into tears.

It was interminable.

Then Sango opened her mouth.

"I can feel you out there," she said, voice gravelly in her throat, but still powerful and clear, as she spoke across the meadow to them.

What?

Kagome wavered, confused.

"What?" she said, or would have said could she have found her voice. Her eyelids fluttered beneath the sudden, lightheaded bewilderment.

Sango's face tightened. "I know you're there," she said. "You cannot hide from me. I have spent my entire life hunting you."

The world washed over Kagome and swept itself from beneath her.

Then Sango placed Miroku's staff ahead of her, tapped it against the porch before she moved forward with only slightly halting steps, and Kagome realized that her friend could not see her, could only feel the presence of the youkai lord standing only a foot away.

Somewhere in the secret years between then and now, whether to youkai poison or old age, to illness or something else, Sango had lost her sight.

Kagome felt her breath leave her body; she was wrung dry. She thought the wind might sweep through her and carry her away if her heart had not been so heavy.

Sango, oblivious, reached the edge of the porch and cleared her throat. "I can tell you are powerful, so you will be able to understand me. I just ate dinner, and I don't want to have to fight you on a full stomach. My family could meet you in battle, but they are still enjoying their meal so I don't want to disturb them." She squared her shoulders, and the image so echoed the Sango of old that Kagome shuddered beneath the wave of memory.

"So leave this village be, and you'll leave with your life," Sango finished.

In the rising wind and the dimming light, the rings of the shakujou tossed against each other, their clanging voices tumbling across the meadow as though to warn the sleeping world of the things to come.

Miroku, Kagome thought.

She was sitting by the well. She didn't even hear him until he was a few feet away and the rings of his staff startled her into the world again. Looking up at him with hot, dry eyes, Kagome felt grateful that she hadn't been crying, because she didn't want to hide again.

He looked down at her before settling on the edge of the well, his staff cradled against his shoulder.

"Kagome-sama," he said, his foolish mask falling away to reveal the wise man

beneath it, "you will be leaving soon." His eyes, startling and opaque, told the world nothing of his thoughts, and when he turned those eyes on hers she felt safe but cold; cared for, but far away. He was always knowing, though, could always see the truth underneath. That was the one thing that never changed.

Unable to speak, she only nodded. For years Miroku had awoken each morning and looked death in the face; there was nothing she could say that would compare to that. Kagome felt almost ashamed by the strange agony that plagued her - she only had a broken heart, and no one died from that - but she gave him her attention, hoping the monk would tell her how to go on, how to move through it, how to live after she felt as though she had died.

Miroku looked away from her and out across the field, towards Goshinboku, and his staff rattled and sang again with his movements and the slight breeze. For a long time he said nothing, and she was about to rise and go back to the village in annoyance when he shifted and opened his mouth.

"Kagome."

She froze, but didn't answer. It hurt too much.

Then the monk shifted again and she looked up at him, into his brilliant eyes that had so often stared into the void, and thought she was looking into the void herself. She thought she saw the void look back.

There was no smile on his lips, but it didn't matter as Miroku sighed again.

"Things do come and go," he said softly, "but you are here today. It is important to know when you are, Kagome-sama. Do not forget that."

She blinked, confused, as he stood, stretched, and then strolled across the grass, as if he had completed a great duty, imparted an infinite wisdom; if only she could pry open his words, she would be enlightened and she would feel pain no more.

He was long gone when she began to cry. "That's it?" she demanded of the man who was no longer there. "That's all you have to say?"

She didn't see him again. Early the next morning she leapt down the well, never again to return to them.

If she had known - really known - that those would be the last words he would ever speak to her, she would have run to him and kissed his healed hand in gratitude.

And now she remembered that the last thing Sango had said to her was, "Get some sleep, Kagome-chan. It gets better."

It gets better.

Kagome wished she hadn't come, hadn't erased her last sweet memory of Sango with this new one, with this woman, old and blind, with this new cold voice, commanding and sure.

She wished she could go back and do all of it again.

Sesshoumaru watched as the old woman lifted the staff and pointed it straight at him, her blind eyes glaring at him with a ferocity he remembered from so long ago.

"I will not tell you again, youkai," she said. "Leave this village."

Only a step away, he heard Kagome's gasping breath, could smell the regret and despair that choked her, felt a little of it himself.

Then she gave a silent sob, and Sesshoumaru thought he could feel her scream.

Abandoned, mindless. She had lost all feeling in her hands, in her legs, in her lips, couldn't tell if she was breathing or not, and a great flash of silver panic, edged with bitter despair, lanced through her brain.

Kagome whirled and fled, breaking into the forest and seeking the darkness it offered.

She left only the scent of her grief behind. Sesshoumaru paused for a few more

moments, until the old taiji-ya began to bang the end of the shakujou against the wooden porch.

"Youkai!" she cried, voice cracking beneath the weight of years, a clarion call to her clan. "Youkai!"

From within the house the youkai lord could hear a flurry of activity, the clang of metal against metal accompanied by the slick sound of weapons being retrieved from their sheaths, and reflected that it was probably time to leave. He didn't need the fight, and he did not desire the death of Kagome's only remaining companion.

Not bothering to look back, Sesshoumaru leapt into the air and bounded lightly over the trees, following the girl as she ran beneath him, her sorrow seeping into the night air all around her. She didn't stumble, only ran, looking for the place where she could wind back the ribbons of time, erase her foolishness, leave her regrets behind. He wondered how long she would have to run to find that place. And if she did find it, he wondered if she would let him follow.

* * *

Kagome knew he was waiting, would not come down from the trees until she stopped, so when she finally reached a large clearing she collapsed, exhausted and winded, to the ground and tried to recover before he descended from the sky. In her flight she had shed the furs the wolves had given her, but her bow and quiver remained and she removed them, panting, and laid them next to her on the ground.

Thankfully she regained her breath quickly and, no longer wanting to face the world around her, she raised her knees to her chest, laid her crossed arms against them, and let her head fall forward to shut out the things she hated, which was almost everything in this moment. Kagome closed her eyes.

Within a minute she heard his soft footfalls against the ground, and wanted to scream, though she did not know whether to scream in anger at herself for being so childish, scream in pain, or scream just to relieve tension. She suspected,

however, that Sesshoumaru would not appreciate it, so she settled for speaking instead.

"I want to be alone," she told no one in particular, voice only slightly muffled.

There was a pause. "All right," he replied.

She heard his feet shift, but instead of retreating he continued until he was beside her.

Kagome cleared her throat. "That means I want you to leave," she clarified.

"I know."

There was the rustle of clothing as he sat down next to her, and silk whispered on silk as he crossed his arms and settled back.

If he was here, she couldn't cry, and she needed to cry even though she was sick of it. She'd shed tears so often in the past month, and she was exhausted because it was never done. There were always more tears to cry.

"Please," she said, voice shaking with suppressed emotion, "please go away."

He did not even answer her, merely sat perfectly still. If she was quiet, she thought she could hear him breathing.

It had been so long since someone followed her when she ran that she had forgotten what a frustrating sweetness it was to need both presence and absence, to desire both company and solitude.

He was so quiet. His trailing sleeves fluttered softly in the rising wind.

Kagome twitched with repressed movements. She wanted to throw herself into his arms and sob. She wanted him to comfort her. She wanted him to run his clawed fingers through her hair, wanted him to say nothing, wanted him to hold her in the safe circle of his arms until the world and all its careless cruelties retreated. She wanted, so badly, to be protected again. No, not be protected, feel

protected.

She wanted many things. She knew she would never have most of them.

If he were more like his father or his brother, if she were braver, she might have found solace. But he was not like them, and she was too scared to try. In this one thing, she had always been too scared to try, and maybe that was why she was alone.

She felt stupid. Her chest hurt.

Sesshoumaru was still sitting next to her, ruining her isolation, and he didn't seem to be going anywhere.

Well, Kagome decided, if he was going to stay, he was going to do something useful. Irrationally, she wanted to be punished for her idiocy, and if he was still here he could damn well berate her for being so stupid, for all the unbearable weaknesses that undermined her over and over again.

"You think I'm foolish, don't you?" she challenged him, not bothering to lift her head. I know I do. Let's hear how you really feel.

There was no answer at first; he was quiet, back to his old stoic self, inscrutable and silent, and Kagome reflected that if he were merciful, he would say nothing for the rest of their time together. That was probably too much to hope for.

Finally there was the sound of the breath before the words.

"No," he said, very quietly.

Momentarily stunned, she snorted wetly in response. "Liar," she sniffled. For some reason, she imagined him smiling.

"Well, perhaps you are foolish at times," he amended, "but not, I think, for that."

In her chest the emptiness stirred, and Kagome found she could not think of anything to say. That was all right, though. Even if she had words, she would be

unable to speak.

She was so heavy, so... she seemed to sink into the world, and the world seemed to roll toward her. He thought he might slip and fall into the crater with her. Forcibly turning his mind away, Sesshoumaru watched as the moon briefly slipped from behind a cloud to bathe the clearing in bright silver light, and wondered why he felt so sad. Kagome, of course, stirred something soft and melancholy in him, but there was something else, a dejection entirely apart from her sorrow. It was so strange, because he could think of no reason for it, except, maybe, now that their tasks were complete he would soon have to leave her and return to the house that he no longer despised. Soon he would have to find something other than rage or hatred to propel him through his endless days. He hadn't been gone long, but when he thought of his home, he knew he would return there a stranger; even though he had only been gone for two months, it seemed he had left home years ago. And maybe that was the truth of it.

So strange. There seemed to be so little left to do, to care about, so, perhaps, he felt sad because there was no reason for him to feel anything at all.

Next to him, Kagome shifted, aimless despair rolling off her in waves, and he remembered how it felt to stand beneath the moon that night he took back the things he had lost but didn't need. He remembered how it felt to find himself hollow when he had expected to be whole.

Kagome swallowed. She was going to cry if she didn't speak, so she said the first thing that came to her head. The thought that had been rolling through her mind for weeks now, small and tiny and so, so loud.

"I can't go home again, can I?" she asked, and the trembling in her lower lip seemed to have moved to within her chest. Only after she spoke did she realize that the question was unclear, but, she thought, if anyone would know what she was talking about, it was he.

Sesshoumaru was silent for a long moment before he shifted next to her. "That," he said, "would require knowing where home was to begin with."

She choked on the watery laugh that hiccupped in her chest. "And how would I

find that out?" she wanted to know, voice shaking, resonating with her trembling heart.

Through the strange spaces of time, Kagome felt herself float, adrift, for home was never where she looked, and if she had ever found it at all then it was never in the same place twice.

He didn't answer. She knew he had already learned this lesson; she thought she had learned it as well, but she had not truly known what it meant until tonight. She had always hoped that she was good enough, was sweet enough, was special enough to be exempt from this; she had always hoped she would be the exception to the rule, and it was bitter to confirm what she had suspected all along - that she was not immune. No matter how bright and sweet and good and kind she was, no matter how hard she struggled, she could never escape.

For everyone, even her, the bonds of love bit deep enough to bleed.

His silence continued and finally Kagome lifted her head from the cradle of her arms to look at him as he gazed up at the sky. She found him bathed in moonlight, shining so brilliantly she almost had to shield her eyes from the light he shed.

Luminous, incandescent, his face shone so bright...

Funny how she could find only shadows there.

Then the moon passed behind another cloud and they were together in the chill darkness again.

He looked down at her, though she could no longer see him in the gloom, and found her face haunted and sad, a lovely young suicide ghost only he could see, and for a split second he thought she might not even be real. He reached out.

Kagome waited for him to say something, but instead she felt his fingers on her own, and to her surprise he stilled the fumbling of her thumbs against her new scars. She blinked, frowning; she hadn't even been aware of the restless movements.

"What is so fascinating?" he asked quietly, pulling her hands to him and running a claw over the backs of her fingers, as though he could read the answer in the texture of her skin.

Almost squeaking at his audacity, Kagome twisted, off-balance, and tried to keep herself from falling against him. She felt strange, a little breathless under his scrutiny, and she could hear the rough spun fabric of her hakama rub over the fine silk he wore.

Blushing at his proximity she tugged uselessly in his grasp as she attempted to take her hands back. "Nothing," she told him, troubled. "Nothing is fascinating about them."

"Mm," Sesshoumaru replied. Her hands were small in his own; she felt so fragile beneath her proud battle scars. "Why do you try to hide them?"

Her movements stilled, and she felt slightly faint, lost in the dark with only his voice to tell her what he was thinking, with only its nuances to speak to her of what he really meant. Kagome swallowed. "Do I?" she asked. "I didn't know."

"Mm," he said again. "You shouldn't."

Kagome tugged against his hold once more and he released her, watching as she fell away from him into the grass, catching herself awkwardly. He heard her take a shaky breath as she readjusted her position, and he thought she would ask him why.

She didn't.

"Okay," she murmured instead. "I won't."

He could think of nothing to say.

They were quiet for a long while, the chilly breeze flowing between them. After almost a quarter of an hour he was just speculating that she might have fallen asleep where she sat when she lifted her head again.

"Sesshoumaru?"

"...yes?"

The trees rustled in the wind, their naked branches tossing against each other.

"Is it worth it?"

The quiet stretched out, unrolled so gently she almost didn't notice its passing; she could feel his gaze rest upon her, though she could not see it.

She heard him laugh softly.

"...sometimes."

Kagome smiled at him in the dark.

* * *

"You expect me to believe," Sesshoumaru said, clearly unable to comprehend what she was telling him, "that they just relinquish their power after a set amount of time?"

Kagome sighed. Explaining 20th century democratic and parliamentary systems to a feudal youkai lord was a lot harder than she thought it would be. "Yes, they do. That's the key to a representative government, after all - the need for representation keeps changing, so the leaders have to change, or the people have to be given a chance to change the leaders. There are checks in place so no one can have all the power."

He slanted a suspicious look at her from the corner of his eye, and she was glad she was on his back instead of in front of him where he could turn the full force of that withering glare on her. "What kind of checks?" he asked.

"Like..." Kagome tried to think back to her anthropology classes. "Like the fact that no one else would ever let one person gain too much power, because then

that's less power to go around."

Sesshoumaru frowned.

"So," he finally said, "you expect me to believe that they just relinquish their power after a set amount of time?"

Kagome began to hit her head against his shoulder.

The sun had nearly set, and they were nearing Edo; the closer they came, the more nervous she grew. Kagome had been surprised to find out that they would be at the Bone-Eater's well by sunset, but they had been traveling for quite a while. When she worked it out in her head, she discovered that they had made a wide loop around the top portion of Japan, ending at Sango's village, which was a little to the south-east of Edo.

She had awoken that morning beneath a tree she hadn't remembered crawling under the night before; she thought she had fallen asleep sitting up on a hillside.

Working the crick out of her neck, it had slowly dawned on her that she was at the edge of the clearing when she had been in the middle last night. Her eyes narrowed and she shot a look at Sesshoumaru, whom she found standing a little ways away and staring at nothing. He didn't turn to meet her gaze, though she thought he had a distinctly amused air, no doubt caused by her confusion.

"Did you move me?" was the first thing out of her mouth.

He cast a look at her from over his shoulder. "No," he said, as though it were obvious. "You eventually decided to relocate on your own, though admittedly only after some encouragement."

"Oh. Thanks." I think.

She watched as a small, condescending smile graced his lips. "Miko," he said speculatively, "it astonishes me that you have managed to survive thus far without substantial help. If you are going to fall asleep in fields, at least make an attempt to doze. After all," he said, slightly theatrically, "there is no telling what

could happen to you if you were so sound asleep you do not wake when I place a hand on you."

His choice of words poked her, hard. "Wait, what? When you place a hand on me?" she demanded as he turned and took a few steps toward her, arms folded into his sleeves and looking insufferably self-satisfied. "That doesn't sound like waking me up enough to move. That sounds really suspicious!"

Sesshoumaru gave her a look, and even though the muscles in his face hadn't moved more than a fraction of an inch, she was left with the distinct impression that he was exasperated with her.

Kagome was not amused. The world should not do this to me when a cup of coffee is several centuries away. "What did you do to me?"

"Nothing," he replied.

He smirked as she relaxed. "But if I did, you wouldn't have known."

Kagome squeaked.

"But I didn't."

Flashbacks to parties when she was in college brought to mind any number of things one could do to a sleeping person, and Kagome wished she had a mirror so she could strike 'write obscene poems involving squid across forehead' - or something to that effect - from the list.

She stared at him for a moment before arriving at a solution.

"I'm going to pretend we didn't just have that conversation," she announced as she climbed to her feet and began to stretch. "Why are you in such a frisky mood this morning?" she demanded as she extended her arms over her head, pulling the muscles in her back out of the knots into which they had settled.

"Frisky?" He sounded offended.

"Yes, frisky," she shot back, bending over to stretch her hamstrings. "Not that I mind. Usually you're so solemn, like someone just ran over your dog."

After a moment in which there was no answer, she looked up to see if he had taken the bait, but he was looking strangely far away, as though looking somewhere only he could see.

Sesshoumaru rolled her voice around in his head, letting it echo against his memories, and found that it resonated.

"Don't be so solemn."

Who had said that? He couldn't quite remember.

Kagome frowned. It was not like him to ignore her poking, as she usually left herself wide open for a cutting remark. She put a foot on the tree next to her and began to stretch her legs as she cleared her throat - a bit too loudly - and recaptured his attention. "You," she said, making her voice as clear as possible, "haven't been this insufferable since we were coming back from the mountains."

That grabbed him. "Insufferable?"

"Just a bit, just a bit," she said smugly. "Usually you're only irritating."

"Irritating?"

"Oh, stop that," Kagome said.

Sesshoumaru gave a sniff full of wounded pride. "Do not erase my fond memories of you by acting childish on your last day here."

What? she thought before the impact of the rest of his statement hit her, sinking to her stomach like a ton of icy bricks. "Last day?"

The subtle falling of his eyebrows set his face into an unreadable expression, though Kagome thought he might have looked vaguely wistful. But only vaguely. "We will be at our final destination by sundown," he informed her before turning

away again, gazing across the sunny grass.

Kagome wasn't sure what to say to that. It rather put a damper on things. "Oh."

Surprised by her dismay, she frowned, thoughtful. She had wanted to be finished with this, hadn't she? To cut the lines to the things that weighed her down?

Of course she had.

Still, if what he said was true, this would be their last day together, and the thought tweaked her heart.

"Are you ready?" he asked, startling her out of her melancholy thoughts.

Not really, she thought, but outwardly she nodded. "I guess."

"Then let us go."

So she had slung her bow and quiver of arrows - both rather worse for the wear - over her shoulders before she climbed onto his back and they took to the trees.

She'd worried that because of her encounter with Sango she would be too sad to appreciate her last day, or at the very least she thought that things might be awkward between them because of the suddenly short time they had and the strange conversation they had shared the night before. Instead Sesshoumaru had headed those melancholy musings off at the pass by asking about her home.

He had tried to hide his curiosity behind a bored tone of voice but he only marginally succeeded; anyone who asked so many annoyingly complex questions did not have a merely passing interest. At first she had been gratified and happy to tell him about her time, but by late afternoon she was so sick of talking about the modern era that she seriously considered throwing him in the well and staying in the past herself instead.

Kagome continued to let her head rise and fall against his shoulder, as though to beat the annoyance out. Inuyasha had never been such a nuisance, she reflected, though, if she were to be honest, that was probably because Inuyasha had not

been as... astute as his brother. She could not figure out if this was a good thing or not.

Sesshoumaru waited for her to stop abusing his person and enjoyed a private grin. Not only were these lessons interesting, they were entertaining as well. One the one hand, he had not meant to annoy her, but on the other hand, he did find her amusing exasperation an unexpected and welcome bonus.

After a moment Kagome lifted her head and hitched herself a little further over his shoulder. "Why the sudden interest?" she demanded. "You didn't show any curiosity about me the entire time you tagged along, so why are you asking me now?"

Sesshoumaru raised a peevish brow at the phrase 'tagged along,' but decided, for the sake of a quiet life, to ignore it. "I had not given it much thought until now," he answered truthfully. Dressed as she was in the warmer, traditional outfit of a miko rather than in that rather ridiculous green and white thing he remembered from decades ago, it was surprisingly easy to forget her strange origins.

"Oh," she said. "Why not?"

He shrugged. "You do not seem so terribly strange any longer," he told her.

Kagome wondered if she should take this as a compliment or not. "Thanks," she said dubiously.

He smiled until, only a moment later, Edo came into view.

Smile fading, he nodded toward the village. "There," he said.

Kagome followed his nod. "Oh," she replied, and she was proud that she was able to keep most of her disappointment from her voice.

Sesshoumaru did not comment, merely leapt from the trees and glided over the village huts according to her mumbled directions - ignoring the rather vocal interest the citizens seemed to take in them - until they came to the newly built shrine and he lightly touched down in the courtyard. The comment they had

caused was still audible.

Kagome slid down from his back - one last time, she thought - and patted down her hair.

"Just a minute," she said. "I have to go return my bow to Kagura."

He arched a brow.

"Er," Kagome said, "the resident miko. Not the other one."

Sesshoumaru said nothing as she turned away from him and jogged to the hut where she had stayed that first night. When she reached the door she knocked loudly on the frame.

"Hello?" she called. "Are you home?"

When it became apparent that no answer was forthcoming; she frowned and stuck her head inside the hut.

Kagura wasn't there.

Sighing and feeling a little regretful for having missed the hapless girl, Kagome bit her lip and unslung the bow and quiver from her back, placing them carefully on the floor by the entrance. She straightened before staring down at the borrowed weapons that had saved her life more than once, and thought she would miss them, too.

She cast one last glance around the cozy hut. "Hope you get better at archery," she said quietly to the miko that wasn't there before taking one last look at her bow and exiting the hut. The flap of the door behind her sounded like the rustling of pages.

Sesshoumaru was still waiting where she had left him, staring at the fading light of the sun to the west. She wondered if he was looking forward to going back home.

He turned to look at her as she drew near and cleared her throat.

"The well is this way," she said. Her voice came out hoarse and trembling; her cheeks flared in embarrassment as they walked to the well house.

When she reached the doors, Kagome slid them open and stepped inside. It was almost, but not quite, familiar to her, like almost everything she encountered now that she had grown up into this. Slowly, she descended the stairs, and after a moment she heard him follow.

Kagome stopped when she reached the edge, peering down into the dark depths she knew so intimately before turning to meet Sesshoumaru's golden eyes. They seemed to shine in the gloom though she knew they only reflected the light of the setting sun above them.

This is goodbye for us, she thought, and she was only half-surprised when she twitched with the impulse to hug him in farewell.

There's been so much... we have... I am... he is...

The strange desire to say goodbye to him as she would say goodbye to any other - what is he? - dear companion hit her again, but he wouldn't like that.

But this will probably be the last time I see him, she thought. The last time. What will I wish I had done when I can no longer be with him?

Sesshoumaru looked down at her and watched her think, wondering what she would say. He was not in the habit of making farewells - he came and went as he pleased - but, just this once, he found that it pleased him to stay.

"Um."

She was fiddling with her sleeves again, fraying the cuffs with tiny, nervous movements; she seemed on the verge of speaking.

Sesshoumaru waited.

This is the most humiliating thing I've had to do since I had to ask him about his

sex life, and I've no idea why, Kagome thought. She could feel her face begin to burn with embarrassment as he watched her, and she felt the tension winding, winding tight --

"Can I hug you?" she blurted suddenly. The fire in her cheeks flared up a few notches. She didn't dare look at him for a moment, but his silence quickly grew to be too much. She forced herself to meet his eyes.

He looked stunned.

"Why?" he said, perplexed.

Kagome scowled, annoyance replacing embarrassment.

Really. He could be so dense.

"Oh, shut up," she snapped before she lunged towards him and caught him in her arms.

And a curious thing happened then: he did not push her away. He didn't even stand there stoically and endure her weak, human impulse with his usual bad grace.

Instead, to her complete and utter shock, his arms fell around her, one hand slipping around her waist to hold her fast, the other weaving through her hair.

She felt his body curve as he bent to her, until his mouth was so close to her throat it seemed a heavy pulse of her heart would be enough to bring his lips to her skin.

Distantly, Kagome reflected that she might have made a tactical error, but then she felt his fingers spreading over her, smoothing against her ribs, and an uncertain, aching warmth arose where they touched.

Suddenly, she found it very hard to breathe.

Oh, shit, Kagome decided distantly, muzzily. Trembling very slightly, she held him

close and tried not to think.

Later, Sesshoumaru would remember the endless moment before she fell against him in a fierce embrace. It seemed to him that she moved slowly, as though they were beneath the surface of the sea; at any point he could stop her advance, could prevent her hands from reaching him. Any point at all.

He had not touched anyone with any kind of fondness since Rin had died.

Then she was twining her arms around his neck, and Sesshoumaru was hit with a startling wave of dizziness. Unwilling to push her away, he felt his hands go around her, as if it were perfectly natural, as if he had embraced her every day since they met.

This was not something he should have allowed; he resisted such gestures, had released the trappings of affection long ago.

Sesshoumaru was afraid of nothing, but if, if he were to fear something, it would be the memories such an action would stir, the memories of the only mortal creature who had never shrunk from him in terror.

He had fully expected to die without ever knowing this again. He would have been content to never gather another to him.

When she had launched herself at him he had expected something dark and despairing to awaken, and yet here he was - arm circling her waist, fingers in her hair, face to her throat - still waiting for the grief to wash over him and steal the warmth she had brought.

It failed to happen.

She was shivering even though she was warm in his embrace, and something in him, stirred, woke, hungered.

His lips were a hair's breadth from her skin. She smelled beautiful.

He closed his eyes.

Then she was loosening her hold, slipping down as she released him and stepped back. For just a moment longer he allowed his claws to slide through her hair, and then he, too, was retreating, wondering what he had just done, and when he would regret it.

She was smiling nervously up at him, cheeks lightly flushed.

Befuddled, mind in disarray, he returned her gaze.

"You never told me what my normal scent smelled like," she said suddenly, though it did not seem to break the strange, frail quiet between them

Sesshoumaru searched for his voice, found it. "Indeed?" he replied. He could hear the fuzzy edges of his words.

She nodded. "Last time you told me I smelled like an unwashed wolf."

He felt a very small, but very real smile tug at the corners of his mouth.

"When you return," he said softly, and he did not know why he had chosen these words, "I will tell you then."

When I return...

Kagome nodded again, felt as though her breath was trapped between her teeth. "All right," she said, her voice struggling around the tight beats of her heart. She held his eyes for another long moment and waited for him to leave, because she knew he never said goodbye.

He turned away from her and started toward the steps.

Sesshoumaru was only slightly taken by surprise when he felt a tug on his kimono, and, turning back, he saw that she had caught the trailing fabric of his sleeve in her delicate hand. She stared at the fabric she had snared, as if she had no idea how it had come to rest between her fingers, before looking up at him.

She stared at his face intently. Blue eyes searched his own, as though she could find what she needed in him, as if he weren't just as lacking as she, as if he weren't just as incomplete as she. Perhaps she thought that there was something he could give her, or that she could give him, so they would not have to spend the rest of eternity so horribly unfinished, so broken, so poorly mended.

The silk of his kimono slipped from her grasp as she drew back, just a little.

"Stay until I'm gone," she said. "I'm tired of watching people walk away."

He was silent, still as a statue. He did not look away as she backed up to the lip of the well, and she kept her eyes on his as she lowered herself down to the ancient wood. He did not look away as she straightened and stood, her back to the void behind her.

He held her eyes as she balanced on the well's rim.

It was as though they were expecting something, and yet neither of them had any idea what it was they were waiting for so patiently.

When he moved, unexpected, she thought he would turn and leave her anyway, but instead Kagome watched as he took one step forward, and then one more, so that he was only a few feet away. He gazed up at her, expression indecipherable.

Not ready, but the only time is now.

"I'll see you," she told him.

"Yes," he replied.

Kagome jumped.

Sesshoumaru watched her fall.

madoushi = sorceress

Tales from the House of the Moon
by
Resmiranda

Chapter Twenty-Four: Interlude

Tales from the House of the Moon:
The Madoushi and the Miko

* * *

"Kagome."

Five more minutes, Kagome thought.

She was happy right where she was, but apparently someone didn't want her to be happy. The fact that she should have already arrived at this conclusion long ago made no difference; she was sleepy and there was nothing nicer than a soft, papery pillow beneath her cheek.

Wait. Hm.

She cracked an eye only to see a dusty page beneath her head. Suddenly sleep didn't seem like such a good idea. Bolting upright Kagome anxiously inspected the rare text that she had been perusing not ten minutes ago, and, finding it unmolested despite her shoddy treatment, was pathetically grateful that she had not drooled on it.

"Kagome?"

Blinking, trying to regain her mental balance, Kagome found herself sitting in the library, and Ayumi was standing next to her, pinning her with a pensive look. Wearily, Kagome passed a hand across her face, as though to sweep away the

fatigue that threatened to send her crashing back down to rest on one of the only extant copies of Regional Tales of Japan. It was no wonder the book was rare; she had no idea that it was possible to make fairytales boring, and yet the proof was sitting in front of her. It looked so innocent, too. Kagome prodded her brain and found that her last memory was of slumping over in her chair and propping her eyelids open with her fingers. It had obviously not worked.

"What is it, Ayumi?" Kagome asked tiredly, looking at her old friend. Now that she was doing post-graduate work Ayumi was the only friend from high school she still talked to, and that was probably only because they were sharing an apartment together; Eri and Yuka were both married and actually starting families now, but Ayumi, like Kagome, had chosen to go on in her education. It made sense for her - she was devastatingly bright, if a little naive - but for Kagome it was something of an anomaly.

I'd be married by now if it weren't for Inuyasha, she thought. The notion, while not as steeped in melancholia as it had once been, still made her a little sad. After all, it had not been his fault...

"I was just wondering if you were almost finished," Ayumi said, her gentle voice cutting into Kagome's floating reverie. "The library is going to close in half an hour."

Kagome glanced at the pile of notes in front of her, and the stacks of books surrounding that. "Um," she said. "Yeah. Sure."

"Okay," Ayumi smiled. "Don't forget your coat like you did last time - it's getting cold outside."

"No problem," Kagome mumbled as her friend wandered away before looking back at the jumble of academia in which she had tried to bury herself. She wondered why she had ever thought studying would soothe her frazzled nerves and sore heart, because it only allowed her to dwell even more on the things she should be forgetting.

She kept looking for herself in stories.

It was a foolish occupation, but she couldn't help it. There was no true incentive to return to the past this time, no real unfinished business to take care of, and still she found that yet another piece of her life had gone missing when she had returned home at the end of the summer.

Kagome missed him. A lot.

She hadn't allowed herself to think his name in a month for fear of what it might summon, but the fact remained that there was a big, fat, irritating inu-youkai-shaped hole in her life, and absolutely no one was big enough to fill it except the youkai himself. Kagome kept catching herself almost turning to him sometimes to offer a snide remark about this or that human folly that he would have appreciated, only to find that he was not there; occasionally she would do something stupid, and she could almost hear him snicker at her ineptitude, but when she sought to scold him he could not be found, except as a figment of her imagination. Sometimes she could even think of a teasing insult that he might utilize against her; it really was astonishing how thoroughly he managed to distract her even when not physically present.

Not to mention there was that weird... thing... they had maybe-probably promised each other in the well-house, except there had never really been an explicit pact and Kagome found herself wondering if what he had said had just been his weird way of making her feel better for leaving everything behind for good, or even if he had ever said those things at all.

When you come back...

I'll see you.

Yes.

It had been a complete surprise. But then again, she hadn't expected him to return her embrace either.

That had been... she didn't know what it had been, but whenever she remembered his claws tangled in her hair or the feel of his breath washing over throat, her cheeks would flare up in an incandescent schoolgirl blush which was,

while not an entirely unexpected reaction, nevertheless an unwelcome one. A month after returning, Kagome had sat in class and counted how many times her thoughts strayed to him, and when she found herself thinking about his arms around her for the fourteenth time in the space of three hours she had given up trying to pretend that he was not, in fact, somewhat attractive. Nascent pretty-hair fetish notwithstanding, her reaction to his extreme proximity - and the fact that he hadn't pushed her away like she had expected - was perfectly natural, except for the fact that it made her incredibly guilty whenever she remembered that she was, essentially, thinking these vaguely titillating thoughts about Inuyasha's brother. She loved Inuyasha and the two brothers had hated each other for the majority of their lives, and it was just wrong. End of story.

Not to mention that there also seemed something incredibly fickle about going from loving one brother straight into... Well, something. Kagome wasn't even certain her feelings for the two were even comparable, which seemed to be both reassuring and rather worrying, and strangely made her guilt more acute. Still, it didn't really matter, as clearly she was just being weird and hormonal and it had been too long since she had cared about someone enough to even consider any sort of real attachment...

...well, that was better left alone.

Kagome sighed; she was getting off track, and mentally reasserted her train of thought.

So. Vague - and most assuredly ridiculous - fixations on entirely unavailable demons aside, it was possibly probable that there had been an inexplicit promise between herself and said demon, and she never broke her promises. That was why she kept looking for tales of mikos with a genesis near the very end of the Sengoku Jidai. She was trying to keep her promise to him. Kagome just hoped said demon would remember said unspoken understanding if she ever found her way back.

On the upside, he was him, and he didn't seem to change or grow old, so there was really no reason to avoid the chance to see him again. The strange thing -- that wasn't strange at all, and was therefore strange -- was that she truly did miss him. She missed the easy way they bantered back and forth, the easy way they

slid into silence, the easy way they leapt over hurdles together, the easy way they could speak of their mysteries in the dark. Perhaps she should be nervous about feeling such a strong connection to such a morally ambiguous individual, but she just couldn't muster the strength needed to care.

It was -- no, she might as well admit it -- he was comforting, among other things. Before, he had simply been 'Inuyasha's Jerk Brother'; he had just been a two dimensional portrait in the entrance hall of her head. Now, however, he had stepped down from that painting with all the haughty arrogance of the prince that he was and casually strolled into her most private rooms, no doubt dryly commenting on the rather pedantic decor as he went.

Somehow, that notion did not seem as ludicrous - or as awkward - as it should have been.

And, of course, it went without saying that she was dying for a stress-relieving argument, which was a strange aspect of her personality that had hitherto gone unexplored until he had happened along, and since he had "happened along" some four hundred years in the past there was no hope in finding that perfect person to snark at. Their temporal distance did nothing to help her achieve her goals. Kagome found it all very unfair, and she was going to lodge a formal complaint as soon as she figured out to whom it should be addressed.

"Gnuh," she said as she turned back to the stultifying text in front of her. She had maybe fifteen minutes to try and find the fairytale she was looking for. If, that is, it was actually in the book, which was still up in the air as the author had not thought to supply either an index or a table of contents to his hapless audience.

She was searching for the earlier versions of several well-known fairytales but so far she had been unsuccessful as the most efficient way to search the book was to go page by page, scanning for this or that word that pertained to the later versions. It was frustrating her to no end.

Kagome chewed her bottom lip as she skimmed the pages.

No... no... hime... no... no, no, no, no... heaven, no, god, no... sea, king, no, no, no... sorceress, no... miko, no -

Her brain skipped a beat.

Kagome stopped in her perusal, almost afraid to turn back the page she had just flipped over for fear that she had read the word incorrectly, and the sudden pounding of her heart, the thunder of blood in her ears, would be for nothing.

This is not me, she thought, steeling herself.

Slowly she lifted the page and let it flutter back.

...the story of the miko and the madoushi originated near the beginning of the Tokugawa period in the Tokyo prefecture, though a remarkably similar tale is told in the region of Kyoto, indicating migration or, though unlikely, a basis in fact...

Kagome felt the breath leave her body. Tokyo and Kyoto. Edo and the western lands.

Forcibly she shook her head, as though to dislodge the fluttering hope that had become trapped inside. It probably meant nothing. It couldn't mean anything.

Her eyes snapped closed and she took an enormous breath, trying to calm the sudden jittering in her body, the feel of nerves on high alert. Swallowing, she looked back down at the page.

...the two tales are very similar and differ only in one minor respect. They start out the same: a young miko makes an appearance in Edo. Though incredibly powerful, she is almost entirely untrained, and her skills in combat are nearly absent despite her innate talent. Around the same time a madoushi of evil intent also arrives in Edo. Unlike the miko, the madoushi lacks her own innate power, but she has compensated for this defect by selling her soul to a dark god. Accounts differ as to the god's nature, but it takes pleasure in the suffering of others In order to infiltrate the growing city of Edo, she disguises herself as a miko, as that will give her the closest proximity to suffering so that her god may feast upon it. It is interesting to note that during the time this story originated a particularly virulent strain of what was probably influenza was sweeping through the city, which might have lent credence to an evil influence. Regardless, the miko,

encountering the madoushi, is challenged.

Kagome blinked. Challenged? Argh. I don't know if I want this to be me or not! She frowned and bent her head to the page to keep reading.

Both the miko and the madoushi are injured in their battle, but due to the madoushi's dark pact, as long as the god is free she will heal rapidly, and cannot be killed. The miko flees.

Here the two stories momentarily diverge. Accounts differ as to whether she travels to the south, as maintained by the Tokyo tale, or to the west, as claimed by the Kyoto tale. Regardless of her direction she seeks counsel and training in the art of being a priestess, and in the art of battle, though the training is by necessity incomplete. Through her training, the miko is intensely aware that the evil of the madoushi has already ruined many lives and will eventually decimate the city unless the miko defeats her. She decides that it would be better for her to die than to leave the madoushi to feast on the suffering of others any longer than necessary. After undergoing a period of intense training, the miko is declared adequately prepared to defeat the madoushi in combat, and she returns to Edo to confront the madoushi. In the ensuing battle, the madoushi is fatally injured, but again because of the dark god the madoushi is able to heal and is invincible despite her many wounds. Near the end of the fight they are both exhausted and the miko is wounded, but the miko is finally able to seal the god and banish the madoushi.

The story ends there, and we are not told of the fate of the miko, only that the dark god is contained and sealed in a nearby shrine to bind his terrible power and cruel intent.

Even further back than this tale...

Kagome sat back, feeling ill.

That can't be me. Can it? It couldn't be.

But what if it is?

If the story was hers, then she would have to do battle. Really do battle, not just shoot arrows. She would have to learn how to seal a god. She would be injured, and there was no telling if she would live. Of course, if the story was hers and she did not go out of fear, there was the whole problem of quantum thingies that Ayumi had explained to her a little over six months ago, before she went on her first journey. She could disturb the fabric of space-time, or create other universes or something. If the story wasn't hers and she tried to go back, the well simply would not accept her.

But if it was her story, she would have to go all the way.

This was not what she had been hoping to find. She wasn't quite certain what she had been expecting, but severe injury was not part of the plan. Sure, scarred fingers were one thing - Kagome rubbed her hands absentmindedly - but getting seriously wounded was another thing entirely.

This requires rather more consideration than I had anticipated, she thought ruefully. This was not good. There was an ominous feel to the story entirely separate from its poor delivery, and Kagome did not know whether such a feeling was a premonition or just her overactive imagination.

If only I didn't like that jerk so much, I would have never been looking for this stupid story, she thought grouchily.

Shoving her thoughts of him away, Kagome ground her teeth. If the miko was she, her sense of duty would not allow her to ignore it; she would not be able to live with herself. For some reason, Kagome could not help but feel that she was being manipulated by fate, just as she had been all those years ago when she was the one touched by destiny to erase the Shikon no Tama from the earth. She couldn't refuse to do it, so she did it regardless of the personal cost. She wouldn't be herself if she did not take whatever responsibility had been set before her.

Still chewing her lip, Kagome quickly jotted down what seemed to be the important parts of the story. As she did so she began to think more about it.

The thing that struck her about this particular tale was the ambiguous nature of the training and the journeying, not to mention the uncertain fate of the miko. If

she survived, she could seek him out. Or perhaps the journey to the west was to plead for his help. Though she couldn't help notice that there was a definite lack of inu-youkai in the story, that did not necessarily mean he wasn't in it; many of the people she had encountered - and many of the events she had endured - had not been mentioned in the stories at all, and some of the events mentioned had never happened anyway.

Kagome entertained the small hope that, if the miko were indeed she, the whole bit about the battle was exaggeration. Maybe the miko and the madoushi played a friendly game of spades, settling the conflict like civilized people instead of poking at each other with pointy things. Somehow, though, that did not seem to be terribly likely, especially since that would mean she would get a break.

Can't have that! she thought with less than her usual good humor as she closed the book and began to shove her papers and her books into the giant satchel she carried around. She still missed her faithful yellow backpack, but this one was not so bad. It was dark green, and far less tattered, and it had the added advantage of not having been melted on a mountainside in the feudal era. Really, it was a good trade-off.

She was shoveling the last of her affects into the main pocket when Ayumi returned from wherever she had been.

"Ready?" she asked brightly. "I have curry back at the apartment. It'll be nice after the cold, don't you think?"

Kagome smiled at her friend wearily. "That sounds great. Let's get out of here."

She followed Ayumi out into the chilly late October evening and burrowed further inside her coat, though she knew the chill she felt was not caused by the weather. Kagome rubbed her arms, wishing she could rid herself the anxiety that curdled inside her.

On the train ride home, Kagome let her head fall against the window as she fretted, and, staring out into the darkness, she chewed her lip and tried not to think of him. It was no use, of course; no matter how she struggled, she could not shake the naive, childish feeling that if she could see him again everything would

be all right. It was the same urge that forced her to visit Sango - the desperate hope that there was something intangible and eternal that would make every bad thing, every bad thought go away. It was the same immature impulse that made her jump down the well so many times - the conviction that, even though he was now living his life with Kikyou, just seeing Inuyasha again would clear away the sadness and dry the tears. She knew in that way lay only disappointment, and yet she couldn't help herself.

But then again, what was the harm in wishing?

Quietly, softly, Kagome closed her eyes and wished he could be with her.

Tales from the House of the Moon
by
Resmiranda

Chapter Twenty-Five

"Dunbar was lying motionless on his back again with his eyes staring up at the ceiling like a doll's. He was working hard at increasing his lifespan. He did it by cultivating boredom. Dunbar was working so hard at increasing his lifespan that Yossarian thought he was dead."
- Joseph Heller, Catch-22

* * *

Kagome was having second thoughts.

They weren't pleasant second thoughts, either. They were scary second thoughts, thoughts like, what if I get killed? and I'm walking into certain pain and no, really, what if I get killed? and I'm a very bad girl and, of course, argh! None of these thoughts were at all comforting, which was what she needed.

Pink elephants, pink elephants, she thought desperately in hopes of driving the bad thoughts away. It worked only marginally.

Kagome ground her teeth and gave a frustrated sigh, forcefully expelling air through her nose in an attempt to ease her tension, but all she got for her trouble was a snotty nose and a sinking feeling. Time to reassess the situation once again, she thought ruefully. She squared her shoulders.

Current location: shrine steps. Current activity: screwing up courage. Current condition: panicky.

...okay, great. What next?

Frowning, she shifted on her uncomfortable perch just below the level of the courtyard, the warm stone beneath her hands scraping lightly across her palms. Kagome was acutely aware that she made quite a sight - she'd already earned several strange looks for the miko outfit and the backpack groaning beneath the strain of carrying everything and the kitchen sink - and crouching on the shrine steps as if she were in some sort of spy movie gone horribly wrong was not helping. She was also fairly certain her behind was in the air in a particularly unladylike manner as well, but there was really nothing for that. Nervously Kagome licked her lips with her dry tongue and slowly inched upwards.

She was going back. If the well wouldn't let her through, it would be a waste of packing and she would happily - quite happily - walk away. But if it did accept her, she would be prepared to accept that fate and to do what had to be done - whatever that may be - but knowing that she was, in effect, lying to everyone made her sick to her stomach.

She was doing a very bad thing. Kagome knew this. Of course, that did not change the fact that she couldn't shake the feeling that if she didn't at least try this very bad thing, worse things might happen. This would not have been a bad thing in and of itself, but there was the tiny problem of explaining it to her mother, who had been the one to greet her the last time she had climbed out of the well and into the modern era. She must have looked like death because her mother's brow had wrinkled, and then she cried, just a little, when she found the scars on

Kagome's fingers.

"Please," her mother had begged, her voice flat in the entryway of the house, the golden light of the setting sun splashing over them both from the sliding door, "I don't want you to be hurt any more. Please don't try to go back."

Kagome had bit her lip and let her eyes fall before nodding, earning a relieved sigh and a fierce hug. Now she wished she hadn't made that promise, since she was being forced to break it.

Well, no - that wasn't really the whole truth. No one was forcing her to do this except herself and her own stupid sense of honor. Absently Kagome let her fingers scrape across the stone of the steps as she inched her way upwards and wished - not for the first time - that she weren't such a dutiful girl, that she were not so honorable, as it put her in the worst positions and caused herself and her family more pain than anything else, with the exception of love.

This bothered her on a fundamental level, so much so that she had bugged the philosophy professors the department over all last semester about it. Why were all the noble impulses of man so hurtful? she wanted to know. It shouldn't be that way. Then again perhaps that was what made the noble impulses noble - no reward or happiness should be anticipated because the action was done for the simple reason that it was the right choice. She'd nearly died dozens of times because of the Shikon no Tama that she hadn't even known she carried; she'd healed the woman who hated her because it was the right thing to do; and she'd done the right thing at the end of that long road.

Even now as she prepared to lunge into the future, the memory of the wish she had made still caused a twinge in her chest, low and dark; she felt it like an iron hook sunk into her heart, the past tugging on the line, trying to reel her back in.

Kagome shook her head. Pointless, she scolded herself. We have more important things to do, like concentrate. Hop to it!

Biting her lip, Kagome scooted to the right to press her body against the wall, an endeavor that quickly proved to be rather foolish, as her backpack was so stuffed it kept her about two full feet from her goal. Should have seen that coming, she

thought. Kagome allowed her mouth to twist in annoyance as she crept a little ways down the steps and pressed her side to the wall instead. It wasn't as good as being flat as possible, but it would have to do.

She especially didn't want to be seen because she had gone to such great lengths to ensure that no one would find out she was gone. Ayumi was in Europe for six weeks, and if she could sneak into the well without being seen by anyone in her family no one would be the wiser. Of course her mother would probably call after a week or two or three, worried about her, but hopefully she would be back in time to assure her mother that she wasn't dead.

Assuming that I don't die, of course, she thought. The fist that had held her crumpled stomach in its acidic fingers since October clenched just a little bit harder at that.

Oh, yes, now I remember. What did happen to the miko? she thought sourly, pausing in her agonizingly slow scaling of the shrine steps. Kagome had given this quite a bit of thought and had arrived at the conclusion that the miko's fate was up in the air because she lived. If she had died of her injuries, that would certainly have been mentioned. Wouldn't it? Instead, it seemed that she had just disappeared, and the phrase 'back down the well again' had sauntered into her mind and refused to be dislodged.

The thought that she might die had been preying on her mind for almost nine months now, stealing her appetite and leaving insomnia behind; she was thinner than she had been last summer, and there were dark, exhausted bruises beneath her eyes from endless nights of tossing and turning in bed. Her concentration was shot, and when she thought of the task she might have to carry out she felt a spear of ice lance through her entrails. Probably the least pleasant side effect of all this fretting was the simply delightful habit her stomach had picked up of cheerfully rejecting her breakfast at least twice a month. Once a week Ayumi would bug her about going to the doctor since she "didn't want a relapse" - Kagome wished her grandfather had never gotten his hands on that medical textbook - and she was relieved that her roommate had finally left and taken her overbearing good intentions with her.

Still. At least she had cared. Now no one was going to be thinking positive

thoughts for her, or waiting for her to return. No one would know.

Kagome tensed in fearful anticipation. Her breath was coming a little too quickly, and she consciously tried to slow her respiration. It was no use; her heart was pounding with her anxiety. She couldn't remember ever being so nervous about a trip to the past in her life, but then again, she had never had such solid evidence that she was walking intentionally into certain pain. Sure, there had always been the threat of injury, but the story in which she might possibly have a starring role had practically guaranteed the whole thing would end in a boo-boo before bedtime.

Yet here she was, ready to take the plunge again. She'd changed into her miko outfit at the apartment she shared with Ayumi since it would be a bit awkward to have to change on the other side of the well, and she certainly couldn't change at the shrine as that would increase her chances of getting caught. She could see it now, one leg over the rim of the well and her mother staring at her from the top of the well house stairs with hurt eyes. Oh no, mom, I'm not going back to the Sengoku Jidai! she would say. I'm just doing my calisthenics next to the well. See? Stretching! What? Oh, the outfit. Um. Cosplay? No no, wait, honoring my heritage. That's it, that's what I'm doing. Um. Yeah. Won't grandpa be proud?

So she'd tied herself into the traditional outfit of a shrine maiden, said goodbye to her apartment - hopefully not for the last time - and forty-five minutes later she was at the base of the steps to the shrine and the final hurdle lay before her: getting into the well house without being seen. She could worry about finding the madoushi and the coming the challenge on the other side of the well, but for now she tried to concern herself only with making it across the courtyard.

Squinting she crept up the steps very slowly until her line of sight crested the landing and she could see a the courtyard. Anxiously, Kagome darted her eyes back and forth, looking for her mother or Souta, or the figure of her grandfather sweeping the stones with care as he had done all his life. To her intense relief the courtyard was empty, and there was a clear pathway to the well house.

There was only one real question now. To run or not to run? she thought. I'll be doing a lot of running if I go to the other side of the well, but I might not make it there unless I run. So running it is.

I hate running.

It had to be done though.

Kagome bit her lower lip and tensed her muscles for the vault over the last step --

-- and she was sprinting across the courtyard, backpack jerking uncomfortably on her shoulders, each frantic step jarring her bones as she pounded past Goshinboku, her ears straining to hear the shout she was positive would come --

-- and she wheeled into the hut for which she had been aiming, gasping for air as she slid the door closed as quickly and quietly as possible, the weathered wood beneath her hands biting into her fingers. Kagome let her forehead fall against it as she regained her breath and let her eyes adjust to the dimness of the little hut before turning and surveying the jumble of detritus left behind by the flow of the centuries.

When she could make out vague shapes, she inched forward, hands before her to prevent herself from running into anything that might break or trip her up. Straining to see, Kagome let her fingers run along the strange artifacts her grandfather kept, searching for the one she knew was there. It had been years since she had seen it, but it was a valued family heirloom, passed down from Higurashi Saotome before the revolution and the Meiji restoration, and her grandfather would never get rid of something so valuable and so rich in history.

Kagome grit her teeth as she inched along, feeling out old jars, lengths of cloth, rolled paper, little trinkets, until she finally brushed something metal and cloth and intricately carved wood.

Sighing with relief and satisfaction, Kagome eased the old wakazashi from beneath a pile of unidentifiable knickknacks and dusted it off with the sleeve of her haori - no doubt turning the white fabric a lovely shade of grey - before shoving it into her obi. It felt weird resting on her hip, but she wasn't stupid; Kagome refused to go into the past where someone wanted to kill her without some kind of protection. There was no telling if she'd be able to use a bow against the madoushi or not, and though she didn't know how to use the wakazashi very

well it was still better than nothing. Not only was it a live blade, but it could probably do a lot of damage even used as a blunt object, and really, it couldn't hurt to have it with her.

I'm so screwed, she thought. If the story hadn't told her the miko would triumph, she would probably not be doing this. Probably. She felt vaguely lucky that she didn't have to make a choice like that.

Kagome paused for a few minutes and practiced sheathing and unsheathing the blade before she felt she had the hang of it - it was harder to aim for that little opening than she would have thought, and it was curiously resistant to being removed from its scabbard. Carefully she ran a finger along the blade, careful not to cut herself, inspecting it for rust or signs of deterioration. Finding nothing she slid it back into the sheath and tried a few steps to get used to having the unfamiliar weight at her hip before the final dash to the well house.

Well, it was as good as it was going to get. Though her fate was uncertain, Kagome was nothing if not a girl who always prepared for the worst, and she had taken as many weapons classes as she could since the beginning of November. She wasn't very good with either the wakazashi or the katana, but she could at least do a modicum of damage with either. If her opponent was particularly slow. Now that she came to think of it, Kagome was beginning to regret not taking even more classes, but she'd been busy with her other obligations; she felt as though she were in middle school again, balancing the obligations of one life against the other.

Theoretically, she supposed she could stay until she was a master swordswoman - maybe in twenty years or so - but there was the heavy knowledge that if she didn't attempt this journey soon the tension from the suspense might literally kill her. Not to mention that she was tired of trying to hold her breakfast down and stumbling through her days as a zombie, as it seemed that uncertain and possibly-impending death put a damper on one's enjoyment of life.

Sighing, Kagome moved again to the door and slid it open an inch before she peeked out into the courtyard. She was unbearably relieved to find it empty - it was getting warm in the storage hut, and the heavy outfit she wore was only exasperating her discomfort. She had to get out of the hut, shut the door, and run

to the well house.

I can do this.

She tightened her grip on the doors.

One... two... three!

Kagome wrenched the doors apart - nearly ripping off a fingernail - before whirling around to slam them shut and taking off across the small distance to the well house. She cleared the wooden step with difficulty - that backpack was really heavy - and frantically slid the well house doors open as she skidded inside and slammed them shut, pressing her forehead to the wood more out of anxiety than out of breathlessness.

She could feel the well behind her, squatting in the darkness, its mouth open, begging her to slide inside to meet her fate when it spit her out where it chose. She could feel it waiting for her, could feel it pulling her in, and, unable to escape its gravity, Kagome would fall.

She began to turn to meet it, but paused.

This could be the last time I see my home. It probably won't be, but it could be.

Slowly she slid the doors open a fraction and gazed out into the courtyard. Her eyes fell on Goshinboku, where everything began and ended, where it all circled down to completion. She wondered if it remembered her from the past. How far did her echoes go?

Willing herself to move, she closed the doors a final time, the sound of them clacking together loud in the quiet of the well house. If she didn't know better, she would call it peaceful.

Slowly she turned and faced the steps. Inhaling a lungful of air, Kagome descended until she came to rest against the well.

Sooner or later, she would have to find out her fate. She half prayed it wasn't her;

she half-hoped it was.

Deliberately, Kagome placed a hand on the splintery lip and vaulted over the side, letting the well swallow her whole.

* * *

Sesshoumaru, the Prince of the Western Lands, King of the Moonlit Country, and Lord of the House of the Moon, sat beneath the mimosa tree in his garden and, for want of something better to do, studied the shining lock of his hair he had caught in his claws. This held his attention for maybe three seconds before he was bored again, and boredom, Sesshoumaru decided, did not suit him.

It was odd. Even though he had lived for a very long time, Sesshoumaru had never truly been bored. Indeed, now that he thought of it, this seeming immunity was probably a survival trait bred into powerful youkai who spent millennia watching history cycle over and over again. After all, if one was capable of living for eternity, it would not do to go insane from tedium; that would just be a waste of time. Thus they had always found ways of amusing themselves, be it through the intrigue of alliances, the engagement in war and conquest, carnal indulgences, wanton destruction, study, or travel; few seemed to engage in the latter two, but the first four were always a hotbed of activity. In fact it was now occurring to him that almost everything they did was only to kill the interminable time between when they were born and when they would die. Or until the end of the world. Whichever came first, really.

Yet Sesshoumaru was having an excruciatingly difficult time finding things with which to occupy himself. The intrigue did not engage his interest, and the petty engagement in war seemed pointless as he would only win anyway. Wanton destruction was not his style, he'd studied enough for several lifetimes, and travel would take him away, which he was avoiding. Myouga had suggested another extended constitutional, but Sesshoumaru had declined, claiming that he should not abandon his estate again after only a year and a half.

"But the last one seemed to cheer you up, milord," the flea had pointed out, not unreasonably. "Perhaps you only need a touch of relaxation. If you are worried,

you could always leave the running of the lands to me; I am more than qualified."

Annoyed, Sesshoumaru had bared his teeth in a silent growl at the old retainer, who hastily made his excuses and departed. It was true, of course - his last constitutional had been a much needed change of pace - but he was reluctant to again engage in such a diversion. He knew it would not be the same.

As for the final option of embarking on one or three sexual escapades, he found himself strangely resistant to the idea. This was an unusual reaction to say the least; it was not that he did not feel the urge, but rather that there seemed to be no acceptable females anywhere. Every one of them, for lack of a better word, bored him. It was all very frustrating, in more ways than one.

Now, sitting in the gardens - planted once by his mother, once by Rin, and once again by his own command - Sesshoumaru eyed the lock of hair he had twined through his claws and, for the third time in as many minutes, seriously considered braiding it.

No, boredom did not suit him at all.

Even worse was the fact that he knew what would ease the tedium of his days, and yet it was out of reach, no matter what lengths he went to in order to procure it. What he needed was so very simple that it was almost pathetic he should fail to fulfill even so modest a desire, and yet here he was.

Sesshoumaru needed someone to talk to, yet no one would indulge him.

Well, that was not entirely true; they would talk in pleasantries or heavily laden innuendos, but real conversation was lacking for the simple reason that no one ever dared to disagree with him, and any casual insult he happened to toss off was always met with groveling and never a witty rejoinder.

There was no denying it: there was a little, sadly-silent miko-shaped hole in his life.

Not that he missed her. He did not miss her, per se, but rather Sesshoumaru found that he felt her absence in almost all the things he did. She had never

occupied any room in the House of the Moon, and yet sometimes he could not help but turn to where he thought she should be and open his mouth to impart some witticism, only to find that she was not there. Sometimes he even woke a few minutes before his normal time in order to prod her into the land of the living, only to find that he had just wasted precious sleep for a miko who was now supposedly four hundred years in the future.

He did not miss her, but he did find it almost disturbing that she had managed to lodge herself so thoroughly in his brain, and it did not help that he could not find anyone to take her place.

Naturally he had attempted to find another companion equally as stimulating as she had been, but for some reason the females grew huffy - or murderous - when he attempted to teasingly provoke them, and the males were, quite simply, neither pretty nor engaging.

In fact, the dearth of suitable conversational partners was causing a very tiny bit of self-doubt. As it seemed impossible that absolutely everyone was unacceptable, Sesshoumaru was beginning to suspect that his interpersonal skills might be somewhat lacking and therefore the blame lay with him. The thought caused no small amount of annoyance, but he was able to ignore it surprisingly well, since, clearly, even were he to be less than exquisitely fascinating, the world should bend to him and not the other way around.

There was also the matter of their sparse exchange before she left; nothing had been out-right stated, but the hint of a promise was there, and Sesshoumaru was not in the habit of making promises, much less to humans.

Even worse, he was as unsettled by that almost as much as he was unsettled by the memory of her embrace, which had begun to visit him with ever more alarming frequency, and at the most inconvenient of times. Only two days ago he had been seated in his study listening to two of his vassals bickering about some petty disagreement when he suddenly remembered what she smelled like, and how she felt in his arms. The thought must have had a visible effect on him for the lesser youkai had slowly trailed off and asked him if he was feeling well, snapping him out of the memory. Annoyed, he had ordered them to take the silly dispute to Myouga and to no longer waste his time with such trivial matters. They had

bowed and fled, leaving him alone with the memory that no one could relieve from him.

He knew why he felt her absence; he was not in the habit of lying to himself, or of avoiding the truth of a situation. In the private, dusty corners of his mind, Sesshoumaru quietly admitted that no one else knew his secrets as she did, so it was as if the world had dissipated between the youkai lord and the miko, yet remained everywhere else. There had been an intangible barrier blocking him from all others, but she had scaled the wall - or perhaps he was the one who leapt over - that separated them from each other. He feared nothing, but if, if he were to fear something, he would fear this sudden nakedness; he would fear this thing that made him feel as though he were standing on the side of a cliff, feet against the sheer wall and the sky in front of him, this thing that made him feel as though the sea was roaring at his back, howling that he could not defy the pull of the earth. Yet he still stood, face to the clouds and Kagome sliding through his mind.

He tried not to think about that very much.

In short, she was a complication, and the fact that he dwelled on her so much was even more of a complication - one that he did not need - so it was a mystery as to why he continued to do so. He was finding it damnably difficult to stop.

Unfortunately no suitable replacement had appeared to take his mind off her, and if what she had said was true, then, unless she found a way back to this time again, he would have to wait four hundred years to see her. How was he going to pass the time between now and then! The thought caused his mind to recoil in vague horror and even prompted him to consider - very briefly - going on some quest or other, just in case he was supposed to, and she would show up along the way.

He frowned; there was no use dwelling on that when it was so terribly depressing, so Sesshoumaru forcibly turned his thoughts down a different path and wondered if she was going to come back. If she wasn't, would he still remember her in four centuries? If she wasn't, would he find her anyway? She had not mentioned that she had seen him in her time, so that led him to think that he would not. Unless his future self was staying out of the way until she had finished her duties in the past, in which case he found himself to be extremely clever. Mentally, he gave the

future him a preemptive pat on the back for such wonderful temporal agility.

As always when he went down this path, he ignored the tiny, nagging question of whether or not he would still be alive in her time.

It was unthinkable that he should die. After all, he was Sesshoumaru.

Having reestablished his identity, Sesshoumaru arrived at the conclusion that this endless obsessing was going nowhere and he should abandon it for something more productive. Sesshoumaru sighed dramatically, as today he was allowing himself the very small indulgence of moping. But only because no one else was around to witness it.

So. Here he was, sitting in his garden, wondering what the hell he should do with himself. If nothing presented itself soon he was going to be forced to either braid his hair or demand the company of one of his subjects. They were all boring, of course, but some were less boring than others so he was feeling particularly well-disposed toward this option. Anything was better than the Lord of the West trying out new hairstyles in the garden - he might be forced to shun himself out of the sheer embarrassment of it - and he would welcome almost anything if it lessened his crippling ennui. He knew they would all bore him with what they thought passed for conversation, but there was one thing that always cheered him up, and that was kicking the ass of some hapless opponent up and down the western coastline.

He needed a sparring partner.

Sesshoumaru frowned, thinking. Finding a suitable opponent means inviting a suitable opponent means ordering a servant to invite a suitable opponent means I need a servant, he thought vaguely. He pursed his lips very slightly in concentration before he rose to his feet and walked into the house, his steps filled with purpose and the hope of finding some luckless underling and making his or her life miserable for the next few hours.

To his good fortune, he found his secretary - whose name he could never quite recall - shuffling nervously through a pile of papers in his study. Sesshoumaru had not bothered to learn the man's name as he would no doubt cease being useful

within another year and Sesshoumaru would be forced to find yet another secretary.

This particular specimen, who had seemed so reliable when Sesshoumaru had first engaged his services, had lately developed several nervous tics in his face, and seemed far more high strung than the relatively calm and confident individual he had been but a scant year ago. This seemed to happen a lot with his secretaries, and Sesshoumaru found himself obligated to find a new one every two years as they inevitably developed heart problems and he didn't want them keeling over and making a stink.

Sesshoumaru gave an inward sigh at the inconveniences he was forced to endure as a result of inferior help. No one could be as perfect as he, but sometimes it seemed like they didn't even try.

He cleared his throat.

His secretary shrieked and leapt a foot in the air before executing an impressive half twist to land in a bow. "Sesshoumaru-sama!" he forced out in a quavering voice. "How may I serve you?"

Sesshoumaru thought for a moment, trying to word his request carefully so there would be no misunderstanding. "I find myself desirous of a diversion," he said finally.

His secretary very slowly moved to a sitting position. "What - ah - what type of a diversion is milord in want of?"

"I want someone to fight."

There was a pause.

"Er... you mean a sparring opponent?"

The youkai lord raised an eyebrow as if to ask what else he could have meant.

"So... not a war?"

Sesshoumaru bared his teeth, hoping to get the message across. It seemed to work.

His secretary banged his forehead on the floor in his haste to bow with the proper deference. "Forgive me, milord!" he squeaked. "I will find a suitable guest among your vassals as soon as possible!"

Sesshoumaru couldn't resist. "'As soon as possible' is your clever euphemism for 'now', I suppose?"

"Yes! Yes it is!"

"Good," he said. With that he turned gracefully and strolled down the hallway in search of another servant he could bully into drawing him a bath, leaving his unhappy secretary to tend to his social life.

He really didn't miss her.

Much.

* * *

Once upon a time, when Kagome's father had died - so long ago now - she had felt the world change. Effortlessly, it had melted from the brightly lit world of her childhood into a place full of shadows and things waiting to grab her with spidery fingers and drag her away from the things she loved. She began to fear things she had never thought to fear, began to worry about things she had never before considered, and wept more tears than she had ever thought possible, letting them drip down into the empty place in her chest where he had lived, and it was as though she had passed across a border and into another country, and there was no turning back.

It was as if the world had been a droplet of water that had suddenly hit the ground, splashing apart all around her; though she had not known it, she had always been traveling that way, toward that moment.

That, Kagome knew, was fate.

And now, at the bottom of the well...

Malevolence. Cruelty. Despair. It soaked the air, seeped into her skin, pierced the light with darkness.

She couldn't breathe. The magic had released her into a slender iron noose, and the feel of icy molten steel dripping over her heart blocked out everything but the horror. Struggling to live, Kagome sat at the bottom of the well, her powers flaring weakly against the horrible weight of the evil she could feel in the air.

All the good things in the world had burned away, leaving only this heavy mantle of wicked ashes behind; it scorched down her throat as she tried to draw air.

Kagome felt the world change between the shadowy world of her youth into a sinister darkness that no light could penetrate.

Something evil was out there. She was all alone, and something hated her.

The madoushi, she thought incoherently.

And this, Kagome knew, was fate as well.

Her mind was skittish, running from her, threatening to dart away into other spaces and leave her with only her instincts, and her instincts would cause her to do stupid things. Fight or flight? How well would she do both in the grip of mindless fear? No, she had to control this. She'd conquered evil before, and she could do it again.

Her jaw squared with purpose. Kagome scowled as she slowed her breathing so she would not hyperventilate from the panic this evil inspired, and, swallowing, she tried to think rationally about the situation.

What would Inuyasha do? Plunge in head first. So. Not the best example. Miroku, then. What would he do?

The tense muscles in her shoulders unwound a fraction as she stared blankly at the dirt in front of her and contemplated the monk who had always been the most level-headed person she had known; she found that it comforted her to think of him. Kagome listened to her heart begin to slow very slightly as she forced herself to calm down.

Miroku. He would be cautious. He would try to get away from something like this if he couldn't fight it. Then he would make a joke about it and brush it off and then try to find some girl to bear his child. I probably shouldn't do that last thing, but the rest sounds pretty good.

All right. This was her fate, and that's what she would do. On the other hand, it was rather upsetting. Why don't I ever get the good fates? she thought grouchily. Like the 'rich and famous' fate? Or the 'true love' fate? I'm so sick of this 'heroine' and this 'save the world' crap.

Kagome felt her hands curl in the dirt beneath her fingers, pushing slightly damp mud beneath her fingernails, which meant that, on top of the creeping corruption she felt even in the shrine, she was only five minutes into this adventure and she was already dirty. It was probably some kind of record.

Fabulous.

A slight swell in the malevolent presence brought her back to the real world, and Kagome determined that she wasn't getting anywhere sitting at the bottom of the well, and she certainly wasn't increasing her chances of surviving by being a sitting duck for the horrible thing that had caused this feeling. She would bet anything that it could sense her powers sparking beneath her skin; she could feel the purity in her struggling to get out in self defense. Unfortunately there was no way she could purify all of this vile aura and it would probably exhaust her to try, so she kept in check as best as possible though it constantly threatened to slip from her fingers.

I have to get out of here, she thought, slowly and deliberately. The story said south or west.

I have to get out of here and get to the west. As if there had ever been any question which direction she would go.

Mouth thinning into a white line, Kagome straightened and squared her shoulders, shakily sucking in air before beginning the long climb upwards into the world as she ignored, with a fierce determination, the fear that nipped at her ankles.

When she crested the lip of the well she was almost shocked to see that it was light outside, though it made sense - after all, the darkness was only metaphorical, and the shining sun had nothing to do with it - and light was good; it meant she had a better chance of seeing what was coming. Cautiously Kagome levered herself over the edge and put her feet down as quietly as possible, trying not to draw attention to her presence.

She could almost feel the eddies she caused in the flow of the horrible aura. Shuddering, she crept up the steps. She winced at each creak as she kept her eyes trained on the square of light above her. Hastily she tried to decide whether to run or walk away - some part of her was still hoping, even though she was obviously stuck in the fairytale, that she would get away from Edo unscathed - and decided that running would draw too much attention. Perhaps if she acted like she belonged there no one would take notice of her, large green backpack notwithstanding. It could work, right?

The wood of the wall caught against the front of her haori as she pressed herself against it, just out of the line of sight from the courtyard outside, and a thin trickle of sweat rolled from her armpit down her side, though her hands felt like ice.

Check it out. You just did this five minutes ago.

It wasn't the best of pep talks, but she managed to force herself to inch slowly toward the doorway until she could peek one eye out towards Goshinboku.

The courtyard was almost ominous in its emptiness, and she couldn't see anyone around, though she could feel the sluggish ebb and flow of evil all around her. Wherever the sorceress and her sidekick were, they were doing a really great job. It was so strong...

Her heart was pounding again, causing a curious tickle in her chest and a heavy openness in her throat where she could feel her pulse hammer at the edge of her jaw. Kagome closed her eyes and, gripping the straps of her back pack so tightly she thought she might break her own fingers, stepped slowly into the courtyard.

Still no one appeared. Kagome took this as an encouraging sign and continued toward the exit, forcing her feet to remain even and sure in their stride, even though the muscles in her legs were twitching minutely with the urge to run.

Closer, closer, she thought. Almost there. The exit, then the steps, and she would be in the city, where it would be easier to blend in. She might even avoid the madoushi all togeth --

There was no noise, but she knew. The knowledge dropped straight into her brain like chilled jelly, causing the dark, primitive part of her that lived in the small of her back to stir in fright.

It was behind her.

At the base of her skull, the part of her that had never stopped fearing the shadows beyond the campfire, that had listened to the howls of predators in the time before history, sank its teeth through her spine.

Run, it whispered. Run, run, run, run, runrunrunrunrunrunrunrunRUNRUN --

She slowed to a halt at the top of the steps.

Kagome turned to face her fate.

The madoushi was strikingly unimpressive. She had a plain face - neither ugly nor pretty - and was dressed in the traditional priestess costume, her long black hair pulled back into a low que. She was looking at Kagome with what might have been lightly shocked bemusement, or maybe surprised fear, but it was impossible to tell; her features were only slightly quirked into her unreadable expression. In her hand was a staff, and she stood with a sort of easy insolence found only in those who believed themselves to be invincible, though if the story had told the truth then that was indeed the case, even if nothing about her suggested that she

was privy to such things. In fact, she seemed wholly unremarkable, except for the dark power that rolled out in great, blinding waves from somewhere behind her.

The god was somewhere in the shrine. Where was the real miko? Why weren't there any monks or priestesses or holy men here, drawn by her malevolent presence, to cast her out? Could they not feel it? What had gone wrong?

They were still staring at each other; neither seemed willing to make the first move. Maybe, Kagome thought, if I just leave quietly, I won't get hurt.

Her shoe scraped lightly against the ground as she shifted her weight, preparing to pivot, when the sorceress spoke.

"How did you get past my barrier?" she demanded, her voice low and smooth. "No one has yet been able to breach it."

Kagome did not know how to answer, so she said nothing, only rocked warily backwards, almost, but not quite, stepping back. The muscles in her neck worked in a hard swallow, painfully forcing the sharp object that seemed to have become lodged in her throat down to rest heavily in her stomach. That explains why no one has thrown her out yet, Kagome thought giddily. The madoushi had guarded herself well.

Her rival's plain face was beginning to melt into a frown. "Tell me how you did it," she demanded. "I can tell you are a holy woman. It should not have been possible." Then her eyes narrowed further.

"Who are you?"

Kagome froze. The precious seconds were falling away. Should she say her name or think up another? A lie or the truth? Kagome or -- Oh god --

"Kagome," she blurted, unable to decide, knowing that each moment she hesitated made things worse.

Then she wished she had hesitated more, had said anything other than her real name, for the madoushi's eyes widened, and she quirked a brow. "Kagome, eh?

Not the Kagome?"

Kagome felt her hands twitch, her fingernails digging into the soft flesh of her palm in her anxiety. Dimly, she wondered if the madoushi or her god could feel her emotions - that would be disastrous.

A vision of Sesshoumaru, always stoic and calm in the face of danger, boredom oozing from every pore, flashed in her mind, and she struggled to school her features into a mask of apathy in imitation. He always seemed so unflappable; she remembered, before they were friends, that his indifference was intimidating when they fought. Be bored, her mind screamed at her. Never let them know!

Then the sorceress was moving, posture straightening into alertness instead of insolence. Kagome saw the hand on the staff tighten, and she realized that her name actually carried some weight, which would be good for deterrence, but bad when she was actually called to live up to it.

The madoushi was speaking again, and this time her voice was tighter, a yellow line of tension running through it. "So, Kagome-san," she said quietly, and Kagome could hear the slight in the honorific, in the lack of -sama, "you've come to stop me?"

"Perhaps," Kagome told her. She felt dizzy.

"Hm," the madoushi said thoughtfully. "I see."

The wakazashi at her hip weighed heavily and Kagome didn't know what she would do if the sorceress began to whirl that staff, but she might get one hit in with the blade. If she were lucky.

But that didn't happen. Instead, Kagome watched as her malicious counterpart slipped a hand into her sleeve.

When she withdrew her hand, there was a glittering knife clutched in her fingers. It flashed in the sunlight.

Kagome watched as, in slow motion, the sorceress began to lift her hand. Her

brain was screaming at her to run, but she stayed in place as if she had grown there.

The tiny moments between the grip and the release crept by, agonizingly slow. Perhaps this was when her life flashed before her eyes, but all she could think about was the inevitability of the slice of the blade.

She's going to throw that knife. It's going to go straight through my brain. Or through my heart.

I'm going to die.

The sorceress was almost in position. Her eyes had hardened, her mouth clamped into a grim line, and from somewhere in the shrine behind her a wave of malicious power rolled out, swallowed the figure of the sorceress whole. Kagome could almost see it sinking into her limbs, infusing her with strength and deadly intent.

I'm going to die.

MOVE! she shrieked at herself.

I'm going to die.

Then Kagome's brain, fed up with talking to a wall, hotwired her legs and, as the madoushi's arm began to move past vertical, Kagome felt, from a distance, her feet skid against the stone, the muscles in her thighs slide over each other, the tendons twang behind her knees, and she was in the air, leaping down, leaning back, and she hit a step halfway down.

By some miracle she didn't fall - don't fall don't fall don't fall DON'T FALL - though she felt a sharp pain shoot up through her ankle. But there was no time to think about that. She sprang again, fueled by terror and adrenaline, and Kagome hit the ground running, her feet so light and fast she barely touched the ground.

Get behind something! She glanced about wildly, off-kilter, looking for something - anything - to shelter her, and she fancied that she could hear the sound of the

madoushi's feet as she barreled to the edge of the steps, intent on keeping her challenger in her line of sight.

There! Kagome dodged behind a hut, the burden of her bag pummeling her between her shoulders, ankle wrapped in knives. There! Again she changed course and darted behind another, and as she slipped behind a third small hut, she felt herself go through something. Then the evil was gone, and she was running toward the center of the city, to the west.

She'd passed through the barrier. Kagome fled past huts and roads, flying through the budding city she didn't recognize. Her blood pounded in her ears, and she couldn't hear anything except the low, dull roar of her fear, but even so hindered, she could tell something was wrong in Edo. The epidemic? she wondered, her thoughts racing by her in frenetic chaos.

There were so few people around, and the ones she passed only gave her the most cursory of glances before turning back to whatever task they had been doing, but she could see that every last one of them appeared haggard and worn. There was a thinness to them. Even as she raced by, Kagome had to look twice to reassure herself that the light of the sun was not passing through them. There was a pall over everything; she could almost see a dismal fog obscuring the world from her.

Each frantic glance behind her told her that no one had followed, that there was no pursuit, and Kagome longed to slow. Her lungs were burning, and the base of her throat ached with the effort of breathing so quickly for so long. The grating muscles in her legs were screaming at her to stop, and she was getting a stitch in her side, but she only had to think of that hideous evil, only had to look around at what had happened to the infant Tokyo, and her feet were once again flying. The adrenaline was high, and she was passing through the center of the city, moving to the outskirts - god, how long had she been running? it seemed so brief and so infinite at the same time - racing towards the safety of the wilderness.

Then the smell hit her.

Oh god...

Rotten, vile.

Kagome gagged, stumbled.

The scent of feces and blood and rotting meat hit her full in the face and she nearly went to her knees from the force of it. The rancid stench curled at the base of her throat, begging her to vomit up whatever she held, and desperately she shoved the thick sleeve of her haori against her nose and mouth, attempting to block it out as she gasped for air.

Slowing to a stop, Kagome stood very still in the middle of the road, very close to the forest beyond Edo, but certain that if she jostled herself, or made any sudden movements, she would go down on her hands and knees and eject her own stomach from her body. She squeezed her eyes shut, heedless of the tears that trailed down her face from the horrible smell. Despite being winded, she attempted shallow inhalations through her mouth. In, out, in, out. She thought she might be able to taste it on her tongue --

"Miko-sama?"

Kagome opened her eyes and looked at the woman who was standing beside her, a piece of cloth across her face, staring at her with weary, concerned eyes.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

"Um..." Kagome replied.

The woman looked embarrassed. "Only..." Kagome watched as the woman reached behind her, towards her backpack. Already skittish, Kagome almost backed away, but then she felt a light pressure and slight movement, and the woman was holding the madoushi's dagger in her hand.

Kagome stared, her brain scrambling to gather itself into some semblance of order, before she realized the woman was handing it to her, as if it were hers.

With difficulty, Kagome kicked her hand into action, though as she watched her hand take the dagger and slide it into her obi, she had the impression that even

her body had slipped from her control, and the thing called Kagome was now only a spectator inside the head of this strange instrument, watching herself be propelled from action to action with no intervention of her own.

The woman was still staring at her. Kagome felt herself frown lightly.

"Miko-sama?" she said again. "Did Shina-sama send you to help us?"

Shina - ? Her sudden confusion seemed to slip her back behind the controls of herself, and she shook her head.

"Shina-sama?" Kagome asked numbly. She felt exhausted and befuddled from her flight, and her brain wouldn't leave her alone. Not safe yet, her mind whispered. Not safe, get out get out get out -

"At the shrine?" the woman clarified, and it took Kagome a moment to realize that she spoke of the sorceress in disguise. For a moment she considered taking the woman by the shoulders and shaking her until her teeth rattled, considered screaming at her. Can't you feel that? She's evil! RUN!

She did not, though. Fast on the heels of that impulse came the memory of the fairytale, of the influenza epidemic that had struck the small city of Edo in the late sixteenth century. Was that this smell? What the hell was going on?

"Yes, she did," Kagome blurted quickly, her words muffled behind her sleeve. "I just need to... um... observe for a moment..." She trailed off, not sure what else to say.

Fortunately the woman's face melted a little in relief. "I'm so glad," she said, grabbing Kagome's unoccupied wrist and pulling her towards one of the huts. "They're in so much pain, and these are only some of them."

Kagome's stomach managed to sink while heaving at the same time. It was not a pleasant experience. "Some of them?" she asked.

"These are the worst. They are here, for we feared the illness would spread. Others are just a little ill. Some..." the woman trailed off as they neared the hut,

and Kagome saw that it was a ramshackle, run-down old thing. Her guide did not finish her thought, just shook her head and swept aside the flap covering the entrance.

The smell hit her full force again, flooding her mouth with bile. Kagome spat it into the fabric of her sleeve as she ducked inside, fearful of what she might see, compelled to discover the answer to this riddle, and what she found made her freeze in horror.

People were dying all around her. They moaned softly, and Kagome could smell blood, pus, and excrement, each scent oozing over the other. There was another woman in the hut, trying to tend to all of them, but she was valiantly fighting a losing battle; there were so many crammed in here, and they all sweat and stank and gnashed their teeth. She could almost hear the grinding of molars over molars.

Kagome could not look away. Children whimpering, cold sweat, infants too sick to cry, pale faces all slick with perspiration, the rank scent of urine and vomit and something else she could not quite name, but it made her skin shiver and crawl.

And over each of them hung a little of the blackness she had felt at the shrine, squatting on their chests, pulsing with glee.

It was feeding on them.

Her blood was draining from her face, from her hands, leaving her cold. "How did this happen?" Kagome whispered to herself, but her guide heard her.

She came to her side. "We do not know," the woman murmured, close to Kagome's ear so the invalids all around them would not hear. "Shina-sama has given them all medicine and care, but they are not recovering, and she doesn't know what else to do."

I'll bet, Kagome thought. The blackness above the supine figures was stirring a little, as though alerted to her presence, and a sneaking, horrifying suspicion was beginning to creep over her.

This was all due to the sorceress.

As soon as she thought it, she knew it was true. The sorceress had done this, had come to Edo and taken over the shrine and had somehow brought this sickness upon everyone. Kagome didn't know how she had done it, but she wasn't disguised as a miko so she could be close to the suffering - she was disguised so she could cause it without being suspected, and the dark parasite who gave her power fed from the pain she caused.

A wave of dizziness hit her.

Kagome could feel a tickle of anger and compassion curling up behind her breast, but overlaying those feelings was a horrible, guilty disgust, a visceral revolt against the stench of disease and decay that hung heavy in the air. She ached to help, but she couldn't move.

And then the decision was made for her. All around she felt the dark pieces of the evil god begin to draw together.

It knows I'm here.

She whirled and fled the little hut, keeping her head down against her sleeve as she walked briskly towards the woods. The sound of running feet behind her almost galvanized her into action again, but she heard the voice of the woman who had intercepted her. "Miko-sama!" she cried, and Kagome could hear the plaintive note in her voice. Miko-sama, make this better.

Kagome turned and began to walk backwards. There was no way she could do this the way she was now. "I - " she cast about for inspiration, " - I know what this is and how to fix it." That was true, at least. "But I need some time to... to make the necessary preparations to heal them."

Inwardly she winced, but it would have to do.

"You mean to find the right sorts of herbs and things?" the woman asked, following her, her worried eyes peeking over the cloth that bound her mouth and nose.

Relieved, Kagome began to nod. "Yes, I - "

Then she saw it. She nearly fell backwards before stumbling to a stop.

To her left, sad corpses, awaiting burial or burning, she didn't know which, were laid out against the edge of the forest; gray flesh and dead eyes and limp limbs. Men, women. Little children. Babies.

The woman followed her gaze. "Oh yes," she said quietly. "It's hard to find anyone strong enough to bury them all. Progress is slow, but we're managing. You could... perhaps... say a prayer...?"

No, she thought.

This isn't happening. I can't fix this.

Kagome realized she was shaking her head, couldn't believe it, wanted to run back to the well and jump in, but even if she could return, how could she answer all these people in the afterlife if she did?

Retreat.

"I have to go!" she gasped.

The woman took a step forward, a hand outstretched, but Kagome reeled where she stood and took off through the forest, sprinting down the path in the direction of west, towards the only place she knew she would be safe.

* * *

Hotomichi was worried about his lord. As the secretary and immediate underling of the Prince of the Western Lands, it was his job - though truthfully he wasn't sure how long he would be serving in this position - and Sesshoumaru-sama's behavior had been growing increasingly distracted and short-tempered since the year before, when Hotomichi had been hired. Discreet inquiries amongst his

fellow servants revealed that the lord hadn't really been himself since he returned home a year and a half ago, smelling of the wild and the north, from his travel. It was difficult, of course, to put one's finger on exactly how their lord had changed since he was by nature a reticent man, but he was definitely more prone to staring off into space - if that were possible - and he was quicker to cut a sharp insult to anyone who annoyed him, and even to some who had done nothing offensive at all. It made life in the castle even more unpredictable than usual, and some of the older servants who still remembered his father's reign were fretting that the son was captured by his father's wanderlust, and we all know where that got him, didn't we?

But perhaps Sesshoumaru-sama was just in need of a good work out. It was difficult for him to find any worthy partners for simple matches, and just killing things had probably lost its luster long ago. After all, what was the use of defeating an enemy if they weren't even alive afterwards to know that they'd been defeated? And therein lay the difficulty - finding someone for Sesshoumaru to fight who wouldn't do anything so uncouth as die. The task had driven him to distraction.

Hotomichi traveled all over the province for two days, looking for a youkai strong enough to at least put up a good fight, when he had recalled hearing from someone who heard from someone else's best friend's mother's cousin who served as a lackey for some wizened youkai to the north that such a youkai did, in fact, exist. A fairly young bear youkai by the name of Keiichi, descended from good blood - and supposedly a brilliant warrior - had been making a name for himself recently by expanding his territory. Several complaints about that had even reached Sesshoumaru-sama's desk, but his lord was too preoccupied with whatever the hell it was he thought about all day to even bother thumbing through the papers he'd received eight months ago, much less anything more recent. Sesshoumaru-sama seemed to operate on the assumption that anything that couldn't be explained in twenty-five words or less was not urgent enough to warrant his attention, a practice which pained Hotomichi's orderly, meticulous soul. Even more disheartening was that this method appeared to work. Urgent things tended to be communicated quickly and precisely, like the gates are being attacked! or fire! or my god, she's naked! whereas tedious things always seemed to take up fifty pages, like land disputes.

However, having found Keiichi-sama, Hotomichi was having forty-second thoughts. The young man had leapt at the chance to fight the greatest daiyoukai in all of Japan, but his attitude was somewhat worrying.

"Hah! Sesshoumaru? Weak! Too old! I'll kick his ass all the way to Okinawa!" had been his acceptance speech.

"You've - er - never met Sesshoumaru-sama, have you?" Hotomichi had ventured.

"Of course not!" Keiichi-sama had snapped. "But I've heard... stories."

Hotomichi swallowed hard. "It would perhaps be prudent to not mention those stories," he ventured.

"Sure, whatever. When do I get to fight him?"

Now, scuttling through the halls, leading the arrogant youth to the back of the house, Hotomichi only prayed that the young man wouldn't do anything to get himself killed before he even had a chance to show off his admittedly-impressive skill.

His lord was sitting with his back to them, in the garden beneath the mimosa tree for which he seemed to have developed quite a fondness. Hotomichi gestured for Keiichi-sama to stay where he was before coughing loudly so he wouldn't startle Sesshoumaru-sama into an accidental decapitation.

Sesshoumaru frowned inwardly. Just how weak did his secretary think he was, anyway? He'd sensed the moderately powerful youkai arrive at his gates a quarter of an hour ago, and he had been patiently waiting to gut him. Not because the youkai's presence had pulled him from vague, distracting musings of what a certain miko might say about his apparent garden fetish - that would be silly - but because he was once again annoyed with himself for allowing her to sashay across his mind and kick everything else out the door. The approach of the youkai had drawn his attention to this disturbing tendency, and this just would not do.

Sesshoumaru needed to blow off some steam.

"I know you are there," he informed his secretary, who gave a whimper. "State your business."

"Er!" his secretary said, and Sesshoumaru did not even have to hear the bouncing in his voice to know the man was bowing profusely. "The opponent you requested has arrived!"

Had he requested an opponent? Oh yes... to relieve the tension...

Sesshoumaru cast a glance over his shoulder, one golden eye perusing the young youkai standing there, looking slightly awed and slightly defiant at the same time. Hotomichi offered up prayers to whatever gods were listening that his lord would find this sacrifice acceptable.

Hotomichi watched as the lord and the upstart stared at each other for a long moment. Then Sesshoumaru turned away and slowly unfolded himself from where he sat before running an absent hand through his hair, straightening it.

Then he walked away.

It took Hotomichi a moment to realize that Sesshoumaru was heading toward the dojo across the little stream. Hastily he turned and bowed to Keiichi-sama, gesturing for the young youkai to follow him, and he felt a little of his anxiety ease as the three of them moved to the rarely-used building.

Hotomichi hurried ahead and opened the doors, allowing his lord and his lord's new opponent to pass through.

Sesshoumaru removed his shoes before padding across the floor to the wall, where an impressive array of swords was displayed, shining dully in the indirect light. Hotomichi watched as, with deliberate care, Sesshoumaru shrugged out of his haori and tucked it under into his obi, before stretching his bare arms to the wall and selecting a weapon.

Keiichi started forward, presumably to pick out his own sword, but Sesshoumaru turned and glared at him. Hotomichi was pleased to see the young man stop, confused and a little unnerved.

Sesshoumaru tossed the sword at him.

Keiichi barely caught it. He hefted it in his hands before looking at Sesshoumaru who took a few steps onto the floor, weaponless and with casual, commanding ease before he stopped and pinned the younger man with another glowering look.

"Fight me," he said.

Hotomichi grinned and slid the door closed.

* * *

"Just tell me how to get to the House of the Moon, and you won't get hurt."

The lizard youkai in front of her trembled. Kagome was aware that she looked less than presentable, but it didn't have to stare.

"What are you looking at?" she demanded shrilly. She could see the tip of her arrow wavering just a little bit from the tension of her fatigue, but it flamed incandescently with her pure powers. They both knew the shot wouldn't have to be a good one to immolate him where he stood.

The lizard quaked at the tone of her words. "N - nothing!" he cried, voice striving to suggest, while he did lizardly-youkai things, that he wasn't a bad lizard-youkai, that he wouldn't hurt anyone unless they deserved it, that he was a productive member of lizard society, that he always gave to lizard charity, that he had a lizard wife and lizard kids, and that his lizard life insurance had lapsed, wouldn't she please think of the children?

Kagome was not in the mood.

"Then tell me where it is," she bit out.

It had been a bad five days. A very, very bad five days. Not only had she crossed

the country in that time, not only had she been forced to steal a bow and arrows, not only had she been forced to fend off not one, but two attackers, not only were her feet swollen and sore and there was blood on her haori and her hair was a mess and she was dirty and angry and needed somewhere to be safe, but she could also feel the eyes of the darkness following her.

It was watching her somehow.

Its power had been fading steadily as the time and distance between them increased and now it was all but gone, but the feeling had spurred her on in fear of what it might do if she stopped.

She'd grabbed some sleep, mostly in the back of wagons going west during the day - there was so much more traffic than there used to be, and she felt old thinking that - and stumbling on by herself at night. She'd probably traveled over two hundred miles. It was an insane pace, and she was ready to collapse, but she couldn't yet, not when she was so close to safety, not when she was so close to a place she where would be able to rest before going on.

She dreamed of silver hair when she slept.

He would probably laugh at her if he knew what she had gone through - how could she have been so stupid as to travel alone again when she was so obviously unable to handle such things? he would say, and she would say, because I don't have an endless supply of daiyoukai to bother me - but right now she just wanted to see him. She was very, very alone in this time, so alien from the one she came from and the one she had known when she was a teenaged girl, and just seeing him would help, even if he then turned around and just kicked her back out again.

Kagome was beginning to question her sanity, just a little bit.

Am I really from modern Tokyo, or am I just a raving lunatic? she thought, over and over, and there was no one to tell her differently. It was probably - probably - just the fatigue talking, but just - just seeing a familiar face would convince her that she was merely dead tired and not crazy. She hadn't realized how important it was to have someone who knew where she came from with her; Inuyasha had always filled that role when she was younger, Sinayo remembered her, and

Sesshoumaru had been with her the last time she had been here, and even the first five days without him she had been thinking only of Miroku and Sango and Shippou.

Even now, she wondered if she would ever see Shippou again, but, strangely, she needed to see Sesshoumaru even more.

And the dangers of the road! She'd been cornered twice by overly-amorous suitors who didn't care about the outfit she wore and were just looking for a good time with a pretty, unprotected girl. The first one had been a village man who had lured her in with a cheerful, share my supper, miko-sama! Of course, only after did he ask for a bit of payment, since clearly his mother had never taught him the meaning of the word 'share.' Scared sightless, she had tried to punch him in the face, but her aim was completely off, and when she felt her fist whistle by his chin she despaired.

Fortunately, she had aimed perfectly for his throat. He went down like a lead balloon and she had fled, stomach full and virginal honor intact.

The second time she was equally lucky. A soldier who had lost his eye in battle and on his way home had imbibed a little too much alcohol, and had backed her against a wall before she'd managed to make her escape onto the darkened road beyond the village.

"Come on, schweetie," he'd slurred, pinning her right wrist against the wall above her, hot, alcoholic breath washing over her neck, and she'd almost gagged, her entire being revolting against him. He was leaning into her and she had almost panicked --

-- before she remembered the wakazashi. She couldn't reach it with her right hand, but he had neglected to capture her left...

"Hey," she murmured, and he'd drawn back at the sound of her breathy voice.

Then she smashed him across the face with the scabbard.

His resulting bloody nose was how she had acquired a bloodstained haori, and she

had even felt slightly bad about it when she was safely away from him until she remembered how nauseous he had made her feel, and how horrified she was at his hand on her hip -

She had resolved not to think about either of those incidents until she was safely in a bed, and had plunged on.

Now her feet were a mass of blisters and her legs were so sore they had gone numb, but she was almost there. She just needed to find someone who would tell her where the hell the lord of the land actually lived, and, like always, when she really wanted to find a youkai they'd all gone off to Jakarta to visit their sick grannies. Bastards.

Then this lizard-youkai - not a great demon, but not a low-level one either - had happened across her path. Too tired to control herself, she felt her powers flare briefly in response to his youki, and, sensing her, he had tried to flee.

She had given chase.

This was how she found herself, flaming arrow aimed at his heart, demanding to know the location of the House of the Moon. The youkai's first words in response to that had been, "You want to go where?"

Kagome was half tempted to shoot him just for making her run on her raw feet, and she almost went through with it for that comment.

"The House of the Moon!" she barked. "Tell me where it is!"

The lizard's could not contain himself. "What sort of business does a miko have with the western lord?"

"Shut up," she snapped. Her normally sunny disposition seemed to have disappeared, but she was too pissed off to miss it.

"Unless you want to fight him, he doesn't associate with humans," the lizard told her before adding, rather suicidally, "Not any more, anyway."

That was when she'd yelled at him.

He was looking quite cowed now, as though she had finally pressed upon him the gravity of her desire to reach the lord's home, however little he may associate with humans.

"Directions!" she shouted. "Before I lose my patience!"

The lizard winced. "Two leagues! Straight that way!" he cried, pointing to the southwest. "Near the sea. You can't miss it."

Two leagues! That was six miles! Kagome despaired. How was she going to make it there when she was so tired already? She looked at the youkai's vaguely frightened face. "Get out of here," she told him. "And don't follow me!" she shouted as an afterthought, but he was already racing away.

Sighing, Kagome let her bow fall to her side, the arrow clutched in limp fingers. She couldn't even summon the energy to put it back in her quiver as she turned southwest and began to walk.

* * *

It was finally time to admit that he missed her sorely.

It was a hard admission, and Sesshoumaru felt it cost him dearly, so he slashed Keiichi across the chest with his claws - relishing the feel of skin separating beneath his touch - before flipping back and away.

For his part, Keiichi clutched his bare chest and tried to swallow this new lesson in humility, but he found it tasted just as bad as all the other slices of humble pie Sesshoumaru-sama had force-fed him over the last three days. He'd been injured no less than thirty-five times since their first fight, and even though he always healed by nightfall it still stung like crazy. His pride stung like crazy, too - he had yet to lay a finger on the youkai lord, and Sesshoumaru had yet to draw either of the swords he had strapped to his hips. Keiichi wished he could take back every stupid arrogant thought he'd had just so his ego wouldn't feel as bruised as his

body.

"Ow," Keiichi said resentfully, reaching down and wiping the blood from his skin before it dripped any lower and tickled his stomach. He smeared it on his hakama with annoyance before looking back at his host.

And that was the other thing. The lord seemed to take great pleasure in nonverbal communication, but that didn't mean he didn't level the worst insults at his sparring partner; the look he was giving Keiichi now obviously said something very deprecating about the bear's supposed manhood.

"Hn," Sesshoumaru said, clearly so unimpressed with Keiichi that he might actually be impressed with how unimpressive he was. Keiichi grit his teeth and watched as Sesshoumaru ran a hand through his perfect hair and sighed. "Are you quite recovered?" he asked blandly. "We don't have all day."

"Yes, we do," Keiichi said. He wanted to snap, but he didn't quite have the courage. "This is the only thing we've done for the past three days. Did I offend you in some way?"

Sesshoumaru arched a brow. "Only in that your skill insults me," he replied arrogantly, and if it had been anyone else saying that Keiichi would have fought them, but several painful lessons had taught him that rushing Sesshoumaru was never a wise thing to do. Also, what he said was probably true.

On the other hand, humiliation aside this was at least good training for him, though probably not for the lord. His opponent had barely broken a sweat, but he was drenched as though he'd been thrown in a lake. Perhaps he was building character.

Very good, Keiichi. Look on the bright side, he thought glumly.

"Right," he muttered. "Whatever."

"If you are ready?" Sesshoumaru asked the boy, though it was more of a statement than a question. He felt the need for more slashing. The boy sighed and shifted his feet into a passable stance, and Sesshoumaru attacked. This time

he just aimed for the sword instead of the man behind it, but he grew bored with that in ten seconds before he decided that one deep wound had not been enough.

I wonder how he would look with a cut right across his face, Sesshoumaru thought, idly malicious. Might make him look older than twelve.

He darted in.

Keiichi cried out and fell backwards just as the doors of the dojo were thrown open and his secretary tumbled inside, immediately crouching on the ground in the most ingratiating bow Sesshoumaru had seen from him yet. He touched down lightly on the dojo floor.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Forgive me, milord!" his secretary burbled. "There is a disturbance at the front gates and your presence is required!"

Sesshoumaru frowned. He hadn't felt any powerful youki moving in their direction, and, come to think of it, he didn't feel any now. "Who is attacking?" he demanded.

His secretary twitched and tried to burrow into the floor. "N - no one, but... your presence is required!"

Sighing, Sesshoumaru flicked the blood from his claws and looked at his handiwork. He'd avoided the eyes, but Keiichi was bleeding profusely from a wound going askew from his forehead, over the bridge of his nose, down to his chin. The boy was already resignedly dismantling his third haori in as many days to tie up the cut and avoid any more blood on the floor. "Would you like assistance, milord?" the bear asked dutifully, though he didn't even try to keep the weary resentment from his voice. Sesshoumaru liked that.

However, before he could answer the bear's query his secretary stirred. "Er - "

There was a silence.

He lost his patience "What?" he demanded

His secretary, sensing he had made a tactical error, tried to cover it up. "Er!" he said again. "Um - argh! She is requesting you specifically!"

"She?" Sesshoumaru demanded. He thought back, trying to think of what female would dare bother him in his own home with her petty questions and propositions.

"She's threatening your guards," the secretary said meaningfully.

He felt the frown melt from his face. "Really?" he said. His secretary nodded.

There was probably only one female he knew who would be so audacious, and he tried to ignore the small leap of hope he felt low in his stomach.

He shot a glare at his guest. "Stay here," he ordered. Sesshoumaru ignored the unhappy but resigned look on the bear's face as he swept past his secretary, gesturing to the nervous servant to follow him, and across the garden. At the edge of his hearing, he could detect a disturbance, and he entered the house, listening intently.

He was unprepared for the wave of relief that washed through him when he heard her familiar, welcome voice, and the fact that she had gloriously raised it in order to chew out some luckless bastard who wasn't him just made the sound that much sweeter. The strength of his reaction was disconcerting, but he found himself almost too anxious to care, and at any rate, consternation was fast on the heels of his relief.

A human miko, at the doorstep of a youkai lord. The neighbors would never let it die.

With only the greatest restraint, Sesshoumaru kept his stride even instead of quickening his pace.

It seemed to take forever, but when he finally walked into the front courtyard his

strange relief won out over his misgivings, and, oddly, he felt perilously close to cracking a smile. It would be rather difficult explaining away the presence of a human miko to his guards, but he was reasonably certain a solution would present itself in due time. If it didn't, he might have to cut his staff with extreme prejudice, and he didn't really want to do that; it was so hard finding good help. He would also have to order his guest out with all due expedience, but he had been growing bored with the whelp so that was probably for the better.

And really, it didn't seem to matter anyway. He'd missed her, and now she was here in front of him.

Her back was to him, her hair was wild, and she was clearly exhausted, but she was here. Very definitely here, and just as amusing as ever; he found himself rather regretful that he had not been there to witness how she managed to get past the gates and into the courtyard in the first place, but he was sure he would be regaled with the story several times before the end of the day. For now he watched, strangely pleased, as she aimed her brilliant arrow left and right, trying to keep his guards at bay, and even though her back was hunched beneath both her bag and her fatigue, she was still brimming with her righteous anger.

"I don't care what your stupid orders are," she was saying, "I need to see Sesshoumaru or Myouga, and I need to see them now!"

The guards didn't seem to know what to do, and during their hesitation she appeared to lose her patience. He wished he could see her face.

"Now!" she yelled. Everyone saw her hands tremble on the bow, and a few of the less courageous guards hit the ground and cowered beneath the force of her obvious power and her seemingly impending loss of control.

Then the captain of the guard noticed him standing there, and cast a pleading look at him in mute appeal.

Briefly, Sesshoumaru considered letting this little performance play out as it would, but why bother? For one, he couldn't let her throw her weight around, lest he give the wrong impression, and for another, delaying their reunion wouldn't make it any more delightful than it already was. Not to mention that a few more

moments in which he might lose a guard or two really wouldn't make much of a difference. Eager for an excuse to engage her once more, exasperated at the problems he could see blooming against the horizon, Sesshoumaru decided to take pity on his hapless guards. So, too relieved that she was finally here to make his life interesting again, and too frustrated with the complications this would cause, Sesshoumaru said the only thing that came to mind.

"Kagome," he said, "what are you doing here?"

In the ensuing silence, he could almost hear her blood pressure skyrocket, and in the privacy of his head, Sesshoumaru grinned.

Tales from the House of the Moon
by
Resmiranda

Chapter Twenty-Six

"I have no trouble with my enemies - I can take care of my enemies all right. But my damn friends... They're the ones that keep me walking the floors at night!"
-- Warren G. Harding

* * *

Calmly, Kagome thought that if she were just a little more exhausted or a little more crazy - and at this point the two seemed interchangeable - she might just very well turn around and shoot him. She wasn't sure where she would shoot him, since after all she did not really want him dead - quite the opposite, in fact - but she thought perhaps the knee would be a good place, or maybe the foot for added, if slightly inaccurate, symbolism.

On the other hand she also thought she might have to thank him, as his presence

had just improved every aspect of her life dramatically; he would probably not let his guards kill her, and if she fell asleep on her feet he would probably not leave her there in the dirt. Or at the very least he would put a blanket over her. Or order a servant to do so.

Of course, that wasn't going to be a problem. She had been two heartbeats away from collapsing in exhaustion only moments before - she had even been seeing double and sometimes triple, which made her guard predicament just that much harder to solve - but now she could feel a comfortable exasperation pounding through her temples. Honestly, didn't he ever think about what he was saying?

Kagome gratefully lowered her bow, removing the arrow and letting it fall to the ground. Then she stamped her foot in an appropriately childish manner before whirling around, blistering chastisement already on her lips.

"Dammit!" she exclaimed petulantly as she turned. "You said the exact same thing the last time we ran into each other!" Kagome let her tired eyes fall on his form.

For a moment, her weary brain could not put its metaphorical finger on what was different about him. His pretty, flawless face was the same, he had the same swords strapped to his hip, the same golden eyes, and the same stupid, stupid pretty hair, but there was still something slightly off. Hmm... what was it...?

"By the way," she remarked as nonchalantly as possible, "you appear to be half-naked."

And how! her brain said helpfully. Shiny, too.

Half-naked and slightly sweaty. And very well built.

Kagome whirled back around to face his guards - she thought she could hear some of them snicker at her mortification - her face flaming scarlet at both the situation and her intensely inappropriate thoughts, the latter brought on no doubt by fatigue. Obviously she wasn't thinking straight, and she stared at the ground while attempting to contemplate soothing things, like... bed... no, wait, sleep, not bed. Yes. Sleep.

She wavered a little on watery, tired legs.

Sesshoumaru stared at her back once again, torn between several different emotions. He was experiencing no small amount of male pride at her appreciative, though rather embarrassed, reaction, though he also felt a little wave of disappointment as she seemed less than enthusiastic about further stroking his ego. On the other hand, he was also feeling mildly upset at all the damage control he was going to have to do in order to minimize the disarray her presence was no doubt going to cause, and there was a small cocktail of other feelings as well - relief, amusement, gratitude - though they were too muddled to understand.

Unfortunately, overshadowing all of those alternately annoying and pleasing sensations was the surge of pained concern he felt as it forced its way from his throat to his chest. For one, he was concerned about her current state of health. When she had turned to confront him his eyes had been immediately drawn to her breast, where there was a line of dark, rusty brown spots staining her otherwise relatively clean haori. Dried blood. Had she been injured? There was no scent of fresh blood in the air, so if she did suffer some wound it was scabbed over by now, and regardless of the bloodstains she did not act pained, only tired. Still, there were too many other smells on her for him to catch an accurate whiff.

He decided that it was most likely not urgent, but he still found it worrying. However, it was definitely not something he should exhibit any concern over, at least not while in front of their small audience, though he made a note to make several pointed inquiries about it once they had obtained reasonable privacy.

Still, underneath all those other feelings, though, was a sense of foreboding, of bad tidings that he could not put his finger on. It made him shudder darkly in the privacy of his head.

It only took a moment before he knew exactly why the future cast shadows over him.

It was just over her shoulder. Sesshoumaru looked past her to the guards clustered in front of the gate, and he could see them studying her with a strange hunger, and, worse, looking at him with tiny traces of treacherous speculation. He could feel them thinking, remembering.

They were remembering the past; they were thinking of ways to avoid the past repeated.

It was so odd, this feeling, as though he had seamlessly transitioned from dream to nightmare...

Strangely, surreally, it dawned on Sesshoumaru that she was in danger here - there were only self-serving youkai in his house, and she was only human - and in the back of his mind, the memory of what had happened to the last human who had been connected to him stirred its dusty wings.

Sesshoumaru gritted his teeth and shoved the thought away.

No, it would not do to dwell on that, he decided quickly. He had to focus on this situation now. He looked back to the miko, who was radiating embarrassment.

He almost smiled again at that, despite his misgivings. As for her maidenly qualms concerning his state of undress, he hadn't meant to distress her - he'd merely neglected to shrug back into the kimono currently off his shoulders and tucked down and under his obi. Still. One would think she'd never seen a shirtless man before.

Her back was still to him, face that he couldn't see no doubt red as an apple. Sesshoumaru sighed internally. "I am aware of my current state of dress," he informed her. "There is no need to be bashful."

Kagome, unaware of his inner turmoil, had been waiting for him to say something; mentally she had been taking bets on what irritating banter he would throw into the ring, and she found that she hadn't even guessed he would tell her not to be discomfitted.

Weird, she thought. I can actually feel my blood pressure increasing.

"Ha!" she barked out, crossing her arms and sticking her nose in the air as high as possible to indicate the extent of her offended sensibilities. "It's indecent!"

She heard him snort. Strangely, the sound was so familiar and welcome that she almost smiled with relief, but the knowledge that he was laughing at her swiftly negated any pleasure she might have felt. "Indecent?" he repeated, a vague incredulity edging his voice.

"Yes!" Kagome snapped. "Put some clothes on!" She didn't dare look at the guards in front of her; the snickers rising from them were enough to tell her they found this little display quite entertaining, no doubt at her expense. Men, she thought peevishly.

Caught up in his conflicting emotions concerning the situation, Sesshoumaru couldn't decide whether to grin or frown. He settled for smirking insufferably. "Whyever should I?" he asked, not unreasonably, unable to resist baiting her. "This is no more indecent than that terrible green and white garment in which you used to mince about."

He heard her gasp in wounded outrage as she jerked her head to glare at him over her shoulder, and he noticed she kept her eyes resolutely trained on his face though her cheeks were still that lovely shade of pink. "That was my uniform!" she told him, as if that meant anything. "I couldn't help it." Then, almost as an afterthought, "And it was not indecent!"

He felt the smug little smirk on his face deepen ever so slightly. "I beg to differ," he told her haughtily. "The skirt alone was prone to displaying your feminine attributes at inappropriate times."

He watched as her eyes grew even wider, intensifying her impressive glare. She looked almost apoplectic. "If that were true, Inuyasha would have told me!" she said, with as much hauteur as she could muster.

"Why would he, when he had a vested interest in your ignorance of the fact?" he retorted.

As she struggled to contain her feminine outrage, Sesshoumaru noted - with no small amount of optimistic attention - the stirring of the guards behind her at the mention of the hanyou's name. After all, Inuyasha had died almost fifty years ago, and Kagome was most certainly nowhere close to fifty years old...

If only she weren't so inconveniently human. He returned his attention to her face, which had become, if it were possible, an even brighter shade of pink, though the expression creeping across her features was beginning to worry him.

"How would you know if my skirt showed off my 'feminine attributes' or not?" she demanded suddenly. "Were you checking me out when I wasn't looking?"

The courtyard fell silent.

Very quietly, Sesshoumaru observed that his clever provocation had backfired in record time. In his head, he did the mental equivalent of sitting down and meditating in order to repress any vague, homicidal feelings he might be experiencing at such an accusation, especially when leveled against him in company. Then, very calmly and methodically, he scrambled for something with which to salvage the situation. "It appears you are unaware of the frequency with which your garment failed to protect your modesty," he hazarded. "One did not have to be looking for it to see it."

She did not appear to be buying it. "Oh, please!" Kagome cried, "The only time you ever paid any attention to me was when you were trying to kill me. I hardly think you would have had time between fighting with Inuyasha and then attempting to check 'kill miko' off your list to notice anything that didn't involve bloodshed, so tell me - how would you know?"

With great effort Sesshoumaru refrained from twisting his mouth in intense annoyance at the corner she had backed him into. He hadn't been looking, of course, but it had been quite a short garment, and it displayed things whether the observer wanted to see them or not. He was feeling the tiniest bit of regret that she was not wearing it now so they could settle this dispute once and for all when he noticed her eyes straying southwards.

He suppressed a snicker.

Well, then... he thought, enjoying the sudden feeling of regaining the upper hand.

She was still staring.

Sesshoumaru flexed.

Kagome emitted the tiniest of squeaks and whirled away again. Really, she was so amusing to tease, and he had probably thoroughly silenced her.

Sesshoumaru cleared his throat.

"Do you honestly believe that my intentions had anything to do with your garments tendency to reveal more than you wished? Whether trying to kill you or not, your uniform did not seem to care." Not the best of rejoinders, but good enough. Pleased with his diversionary tactics, Sesshoumaru allowed himself to indulge in smug satisfaction over this new evidence of his genius.

For her part, Kagome was engaging in the time-honored tradition of kicking herself.

That was slick, she thought miserably. How old am I again?

To be fair, he was rather distracting, but it was almost cruel she should look like something the cat found beneath the porch while he was allowed to prance around looking like that. Didn't he ever have a bad hair day? Didn't he ever not look beautiful?

And why would she want to hang around a man who was prettier than she was, anyway? Kagome decided that she couldn't have been thinking clearly when they were separated, as all the soppy reasons she had for missing him were rapidly evaporating beneath the blowtorch of her humiliation and vexation. Not to mention they had been talking about clothes for the past few minutes, which was certainly not the reunion she had envisioned.

She wasn't quite certain what she had expected, but she had allowed herself to hope for a smile, at least. Her other visions of his greeting for her when they reunited were also rapidly dissipating; a kind word was seeming less and less likely, another embrace was apparently right out, to her intense disappointment, and... well, he really was very pretty, but she'd always known any of the other options that had briefly - not to mention guiltily - flashed across her no doubt

lonely and overly-hormonal mind were only available to her in the universe two doors over. So no use thinking about those...

Kagome shook her head, trying to focus on the fact that, rather than engaging in any of those rather guilty girlish fantasies, they were instead discussing which of them dressed more like a tramp. The whole situation was just too surreal to be happening. She ground her teeth.

"I cannot believe that you are presuming to give me pointers on my wardrobe when, between the two of us, I'm the only one fully dressed," Kagome told him.

She could almost see him shrugging nonchalantly. "Sparring is hot work," replied. "I would be very interested to see you attempt such an activity without becoming desirous of shedding at least one article of clothing."

Kagome was silent, and Sesshoumaru was almost so preoccupied with the business of wondering what weapon she would choose - the wakazashi at her hip intrigued him - and not at all about what she would take off first that he nearly missed the slumping of her shoulders.

A little, rarely utilized alarm bell went off in his brain, warning him that he was dangerously close to pushing her too far, but instead of yelling she might very well keel over in the dirt.

Again he felt that strange surge of distress, sharper than before. This reaction was beginning to worry him, just a bit, but he quickly decided he could think about it later. After she had been taken care of.

"You still have not told me why you are here," he said, and he was surprised - not to mention embarrassed and vaguely horrified - at the gentler tone of his own voice. She truly was a piteous sight to behold, though - shoulders sloping down, back bent, bow trailing from limp fingers.

She strained to concentrate as Sesshoumaru's voice drifted across her mind. "Um..." Kagome said.

It was so difficult to think. Her vision was going blurry again.

Sesshoumaru saw the slight wavering of her legs. Scowling - she should not have pushed herself so hard - he slipped back into his haori so that he was once again decently concealed from her virginal eyes. He ignored the faintly scandalized looks on the faces of his underlings at his acquiescence to her wishes; he was the lord of the house, and he could do what he liked, regardless of what guards thought.

He almost believed that, too.

Sesshoumaru was not accustomed to raising his voice when he was not angry, but the situation seemed to require it. With a deep, inward sigh, he glared at his audience.

"This miko," he began, and the sudden, wary attention of his guards was his reward, "is not to be touched." Then he paused, thinking before adding, "And she is a valuable ally, and a strong warrior. She is not to be trifled with." It was a lie, but at this point who was counting? He turned and pinned his nervous secretary with a glare. "Fetch a female on the staff and send her to my office, and have one of the guest rooms prepared."

Wavering where she stood, Kagome noted that things seemed to be progressing at a slightly faster pace than expected. She was having difficulty processing all this, but she also wasn't about to argue over her status as 'ally' - no doubt he had a good reason for saying it. In any case, Kagome wasn't sure she had the energy to contradict him, though she thought she should raise at least a token objection. She didn't want to impose, after all.

Her feet felt like lead, which was good because she was dizzy, and lead feet kept her rooted to the ground as she turned where she stood. "No, that's okay, you don't have to - " she began.

"Silence," he ordered. Kagome barely had the energy to lift her eyes to his to register her protest at his tone, but the look on his face suggested to her that questioning him at this point was not the wisest of decisions. She bit back her words and watched as, behind the demon lord, a little youkai was already scurrying off into the house, presumably to carry out his orders. Sesshoumaru

also appeared to be fully clothed again. Kagome felt ever so slightly sorry about that. After all the things she'd been through to get here, it really was nice to see him...

She watched as he pointed at the guards behind her and barked an order at them, sending them back to their posts before he looked her in the eye and gestured for her to follow him.

Follow.

He wasn't going to kick her out, even though she hadn't answered his question, and relief nearly bowled her over. Kagome guessed that he could tell she was seconds away from snorting sod in the middle of his courtyard, and she figured that a half-dead miko, face down in the well-groomed grass like a drunken garden gnome, would most likely offend his aesthetic sensibilities. It was probably in everybody's best interest that she stay, at least for a little while.

With heavy, stinging feet, she half-trudged, half-stumbled after him, surprised that he waited for her to ascend the steps before he turned and strode - slower than she remembered - into the house.

Kagome didn't have the mental acuity to appreciate his home as they passed through it, but she did note that it was beautiful and sparse. Simple, but rich. It smelled fresh and clean as well, which came as no surprise; she suspected that dog demons might want their living spaces to smell as pleasant as possible. Fervently, she hoped she wasn't stinking things up too much.

The most fascinating sight of all was the floor. There was nothing special about it, but Kagome found herself mesmerized by the patterns in the well polished lumber as it trailed beneath Sesshoumaru's steps. Out and out it rippled in his wake, behind him, spreading through the wood...

This floor was really nice...

Her nose smacked into his arm, and, for the briefest of moments, she wished he was not quite so well-toned. That hurt.

Occupied with the slight bruising pain spreading across her face, Kagome didn't even notice herself stumbling into what would no doubt have been a nasty spill when she felt a grip of iron clamp down on her shoulders, keeping her upright. Wearily she lifted her head to see him glaring at her, eyes narrowed and mouth twisted very slightly.

"Sorry," she muttered.

Sesshoumaru didn't answer, merely released her after reassuring himself as to her vertical status, and turned to the door next to them, which looked like every other door they had passed in the house. Silently he slid it open and walked inside, and she forced herself to trip in after him.

Sesshoumaru stopped a few feet inside the entrance of his study when he found both his secretary and a nondescript servant he was almost certain he had never seen before bowing low in his direction. He felt Kagome come to a stumbling halt behind him, and briefly he felt guilty for prolonging her exhaustion. If he could, he would have picked her up and thrown her in a guest room with orders to sleep for a week, but that would be unwise. Escorting her to a room himself might give the wrong impression to others, and the situation was already difficult enough.

The servant in front of him shifted her slightly quaking form, bringing Sesshoumaru back to himself. He realized he had been staring down at her as he had been contemplating, and she was getting more and more anxious. He watched as she twitched her terror-fluffed tails. "You requested my presence, my lord?" she quavered, voice slightly muffled by her ingratiating position.

Sesshoumaru scowled, his good humor at Kagome's presence all but evaporated. "The miko is to be installed in one of the guest rooms; see to it that her garments are cleaned and returned to her before she awakens tomorrow," he ordered. "And make sure she gets a bath as well," he added, almost as an afterthought. Behind him, Kagome made an indeterminate sound.

The woman didn't move. He saw her clawed hands tremble against the wood of the floor.

"Now!"

Giving a squeak as she popped up, she bowed to Kagome before scurrying to the door and sliding it open. "This way, miko-san," she said shrilly. Sesshoumaru saw Kagome waver uncertainly before casting a small glance at him. He kept his face carefully bored.

Finding neither reassurance nor disproval in his features, Kagome bit her lip and walked out the door. The servant closed it behind her, and he could hear them both making their way down the halls and to the guest wing. With each fading step, he could feel the muscles across his back tense and curl further over themselves with stress.

Foul mood escalating, Sesshoumaru turned to his secretary. "Gather Keiichi's things and put them by the gate," he commanded, then pursed his lips and frowned ferociously. "And dismiss him. Immediately. He is not to enter the house."

There really was nothing to be done about her scent, but if he was lucky his guest's sense of smell would not be sufficiently acute to detect her in the courtyard, and if the bear did not come inside he was less likely to uncover the human woman. He had to get rid of him as soon as possible.

Suddenly preoccupied, Sesshoumaru didn't even find any pleasure in his secretary's deferential shivering. Instead, he sat down behind his desk and turned away, staring at the floor that Kagome seemed to find so fascinating, and took a deep, calming breath as he tried to order his thoughts. He listened as his secretary scuttled out to carry out his orders.

The whole situation was happily pooling behind his eyes as a headache. Reluctantly, Sesshoumaru closed his eyes went over the facts of the matter again.

Point one: Kagome was back in this era. That was good.

Point two: she looked two-thirds dead. That was bad.

Point three: she hadn't seemed to hesitate to seek him out. That was good.

Point four: she did seek him out.

That was bad. Sesshoumaru silently cursed whichever god thought it would be unbelievably hysterical to decree that he should be connected to a human being in this manner.

Again.

Well, all right, that wasn't the entire situation, as his connection to Kagome was completely different from his connection to his Rin. Rin had been a spot of light, flashing in and out, brightening his days, someone to be protected, someone to shield and care for as he saw fit. Kagome was... was...

She was a human priestess who had showed up at his doorstep, that's what she was. His doorstep. If word got out that Sesshoumaru, brought low once by a human girl, was again idling among mortal things he'd have no end of trouble keeping his lands peaceful. How vexing.

Scowling, he tried to decide what to do with her, or how to, at the very least, explain her presence to anyone who might feel nosy enough to inquire. For once he was glad that she had associated with the half-breed, as the unprompted mention of Inuyasha's name definitely cast her humanity into doubt. It was even better that she had said his name in front of a whole gaggle of guards, as guards tended to be rather gossipy. Sesshoumaru had no doubt that they would spend quite a bit of time furrowing their sloping brows and scratching their thick heads over the apparent discrepancy between her age and her species, and would most likely include this little bit of information in any story they wished to tell. A stroke of luck, that. Good thing he didn't go with his first impulse and kill them.

And how to explain her to anyone that might confront him? He probably could not simply dispatch all overly curious inquirers to the afterlife - some, maybe, but then it would look as though he had something to hide - and the whole truth was right out. He opened his eyes again and frowned with consternation at the floor, wishing, irrationally, that it had personally offended him so that he could destroy it in good conscience. It would relieve some of his stress, anyway.

Well, at least Keiichi would be gone soon; in a way, Sesshoumaru was glad for this

opportunity to rid himself of his guest. The bear had been entertaining for maybe half an hour, but beyond that he had worn out his usefulness, and it would be nice to have his household back to himself. With luck, the man would never know of Kagome's presence.

Except there was something on the edge of his hearing, jumping up and down and demanding that he pay attention. Sesshoumaru cocked his head, and, to his horror, heard heavy footsteps striding along the floor, accompanied by the scurrying patter of less confident legs. Even could he not hear the squabbling voices, he would have known by their very steps that Keiichi and his secretary were making a beeline for him.

Sesshoumaru permitted himself a groan just as the door flung open and the bear limped inside, severely hampered by the secretary attached to his leg like a particularly tenacious and sycophantic barnacle.

"Off!" Keiichi cried just as he made it over the threshold, and with a mighty kick, he dislodged the smaller demon from his leg, sending the secretary to tumble, over and over, down the hallway, no doubt crashing into delicate screens as he went.

As if I didn't have enough damage to undo, Sesshoumaru growled to himself inside his head. He stared at his guest, who was becoming rapidly more unwelcome by the second, and strove to remain calm.

The bear looked up at his host. "You're letting me go?" he said, almost incredulously.

"I am. I no longer require your skills," Sesshoumaru dismissed him, keeping his voice absent and bland. "Your things are being placed by the front gate. I suggest you depart as soon as possible."

If the situation were less dire, Sesshoumaru would have been lightly amused by the look of relief that shone briefly on his features as Keiichi bowed low. "Thank you, Sesshoumaru-sama," the bear said, sounding almost grateful.

Sesshoumaru merely nodded, pretending to be gracious, before he turned and

began to sift through the papers and scrolls in front of him in a display that would no doubt get his secretary's hopes up only to crush them again. Finding that he liked this prospect, the youkai lord turned his full attention on the task of appearing industrious.

He was almost having fun until he heard a distinct sniffing sound over the shuffling of paper, and Sesshoumaru felt a shot of foreboding plunge straight through his core.

"Do I..." the young youkai began, then stopped.

Exasperation and unease crowded at the front of his brain as Sesshoumaru paused and turned to his guest.

The bear was sniffing the air.

"Do I smell... human?" his guest finished, and the look in his eyes was bright and opportunistic, as though the young man had just turned a corner on a road to find a startling, promising vista before him.

So much for delaying the inevitable.

Cursing to himself, Sesshoumaru mentally scrambled for something to throw the young upstart off the trail. "Not... exactly," he said, desperately trying to think of what she could be instead, but still smell like a human being.

Unfortunately, her scent was bright and very mortal, and could be nothing else. Damn.

The bear was looking at him with narrowed eyes, and Sesshoumaru could practically see the traitorous gears turning in the boy's head.

"Then what is that stench, if not the stench of a human?" Keiichi said faintly, menacingly, and in his voice Sesshoumaru could hear the soft future turning hard as crystal.

Sesshoumaru arched an eyebrow, his face cool and bored. Perhaps, he thought

with something almost akin to despair, the truth would suffice, with the correct omissions, of course.

"She is... an old ally of the family," he answered as flippantly as possible. "She was once the keeper of the Shikon no Tama."

There. The jewel had been gone for almost half a century now, and Sesshoumaru was well acquainted with the fact that Kagome smelled young and vital, rather than old and doddering as she would have been were she to be a 'normal' human. No one needed to know of her time-traveling except himself and Myouga.

"I heard the keeper died," the bear said, clearly not buying this story. Sesshoumaru did not blame him. "That she wedded your half-brother."

Sesshoumaru shrugged laconically, belatedly realizing that he still held papers in his hands, almost forgotten. He turned back to them, away from the young bear who was looking more and more like an enemy with each passing moment. "No," he corrected his guest, studying a scroll with feigned interest, "that was her predecessor. This one was the last of the line."

"I don't believe you. She would be an old woman by now."

The abrupt declaration would have cost the man an appendage at any other time, but Sesshoumaru was all too aware that how he handled this situation would dictate the aftermath. It was disheartening. He was a dog; he was no good at intrigue or diplomacy.

Aware that he was not heading his guest off at the pass as well as he had hoped, Sesshoumaru let his brows draw down into a thunderous scowl. He turned very slightly, very slowly in place to better glare up at Keiichi. "As I said, she is not exactly human; she merely holds the scent of one. You may ask the guards as you leave as to her identity if you are not satisfied."

The bear narrowed his eyes, but Sesshoumaru turned and waved a hand, dismissing the young man a second time. He was suddenly far more uneasy than he had been only half an hour previous; he knew he would not relax until he felt the bear leave his household, and even then he would be slightly on edge. It was

only a matter of time before word spread.

Sesshoumaru listened with trepidation as the bear bowed one last time before exiting his study, though his steps were more deliberate and thoughtful this time as he walked away.

Maybe, the youkai lord thought, aware that he was reaching, it's better that he knows. It's good to know when enemies discover your secret. And now he could just assume everyone knew instead of speculating about it.

Wonderful.

He made a mental note to punish his secretary severely, possibly with things that involved the words 'white-hot' and 'pointy' and 'rather unpleasant'.

There was no doubt about it: she was definitely going to cause complications, even with his little stretching of the truth. On the other hand, as the protector of the Shikon no Tama, she was the miko who had been at the last battle against the hanyou Naraku, and by rights she carried an impressive and fearsome reputation. Indeed, that might even be sufficient to mitigate the problem, at least partially, as a powerful miko allied with a powerful youkai would be a formidable opponent to take on voluntarily. The threat of purification on top of a bloody, violent end should be enough to wilt even the stiffest resolve.

Sesshoumaru sighed inwardly as he let the papers fall from his hands and sat back, wondering why he was bothering with this line of thought at all when he was not weak, and complications were merely a nuisance.

He scowled. He was not weak, he repeated to himself. Kagome was not Rin; she really could conceivably be called an ally, and she did not even belong in this time and therefore was not in as great a danger, as when she completed whatever job she had undertaken this time she would pack up and leave him. So there was no weakness there.

Except that even the appearance of weakness could cause trouble, though such trouble was usually short-lived and swiftly ended when one underestimated one's opponent.

The practical upshot of the situation was this: she smelled human, and there were at least ten witnesses who had heard her mention Inuyasha as a companion, and those two attributes did not make any sense. Hopefully the rumors and the conflicting reports concerning her, her nature, and her relationship with him would be enough to keep her out of the line of fire until she went home again.

Still. It might not be enough.

He could feel history turning over.

Damn. Damn, damn, damn!

He was going to have to make a choice, and he didn't like the options presented to him one bit.

There was the soft sound of footsteps reentering his study, and he looked up to see his secretary enter in a posture so deferential it was a wonder the man was not crawling through the dirt beneath the floorboards.

The little demon bowed in front of him and trembled. The youkai lord lifted a hand to his temples and began to massage them.

Sesshoumaru was so preoccupied with his burgeoning headache that he almost missed the smallest of dubious expressions skittering across the man's terrified face, like a lizard scuttling across a sunlit rock, from shadow to shadow, but he managed to catch the tail end of it despite the man's attempts to hide it.

In his chest, he felt a slow, chilled burn.

"You have something you wish to say, perhaps," he inquired, dropping his hand and letting the cold sound of his voice creep across the floor.

His secretary shivered at the sound. "My lord..." He fell silent.

Sesshoumaru waited, patience waning rapidly.

Hotomichi was feeling frazzled, having run up and down the length of the house twice in less than a quarter of an hour, and his brain was going even faster. He stared at his shaking fingers and tried to find the words to say. "My lord," he tried again, "the miko -- she is... I mean, my lord, I would never question -- how -- she may be -- ah -- " He heard the rustle of silk and the soft noiselessness of his lord's footsteps.

A pair of black shoes appeared in his line of sight, right before his life began to flash before his eyes.

Hotomichi was just reliving that embarrassing incident when he was seven involving the garden shed and an older male cousin when Sesshoumaru spoke. "You wish to advise against acquainting my house with another human, do you not?" he asked smoothly.

Snapping out of his near-death experience and too shocked that he was not yet dead, the secretary felt his vocal cords seize up. He hovered between silence and inarticulate squeaks of terror.

Sesshoumaru looked down at the shivering man, and, strangely, missed Jaken. However...

"Your concern is not misplaced," he said, turning away, suddenly almost as weary as Kagome had been, "but she is a powerful ally, her association with my half-breed brother notwithstanding."

To Hotomichi's horror, the secretary felt his lips move. "Um -- " he said, voice shrill. "How exactly is that association... possible, milord?"

Sesshoumaru stared at the papers on his desk, not really seeing them. "As I said, she is powerful," he half-lied, "and is not to be underestimated."

It was true - she was powerful, but also horribly inexperienced and very, very fragile. Very, very human. It really was a miracle she wasn't dead yet, he thought dazedly. In the end though, it didn't matter; like all human things, no doubt she would pass out of their lives soon enough.

Sesshoumaru briefly gave in to his strange weariness and let his eyes fall closed before snapping them open again. "Anything further you do not need to know," he said abruptly, recklessly. "Our alliance is a beneficial one. I know you will let the rest of the household learn of her status quickly." Then, suddenly sick of everything, he left without a word, walking back into the hallways and toward the guest wing on the western side of the house.

He found the room she was in easily - her scent shone brightly through the shoji screen - but he did not enter. He could tell she was fast asleep.

Sesshoumaru stood outside her door, listening to her slow, steady breathing, and found himself severely discomfited by his reactions to the situation. He'd missed her - that much he would freely admit to himself - but he thought he had missed her mostly for the entertainment value. Unfortunately it was becoming apparent that he seemed to have harbored other reasons for his melancholia over her absence, though he was a little vague on what those other reasons might, theoretically, be. However, now that she was here, and he was faced with the problems she brought...

Shaking his head, Sesshoumaru frowned. She was supposed to be amusing, not upsetting, and his discomfort at her clear distress - far more acute this time around than any time before - was extremely odd.

Probably best not to think of it.

Sesshoumaru scowled.

Complications, he thought sourly.

He turned away from her door. Restlessly, aimlessly, he stalked down the polished floors of the hallways to the refuge of the gardens, seeking peace before the storm.

* * *

For the first time in her life, Kagome woke up nearly naked in a strange bed, and,

to make matters worse, she had no idea how she had managed to arrive there.

She frowned in confusion at the shadows on the ceiling, as if they were responsible for her predicament.

Worst first time, ever, she thought, brain foggy. Not even memorable. What am I supposed to tell my children now?

Well, maybe someone took pictures.

On second thought, that was probably not the best thing to hope for. Sluggishly, Kagome rubbed her crusty eyes with the back of her hand and tried to discern the sequence of events that might have led her to this point.

She had heard of this sort of thing happening to other people, but it was almost always preceded by copious quantities of alcohol. Frowning, Kagome probed her brain, trying to remember if she had been invited to any parties recently, but she could find no memory of such a thing, and as she searched her memory it slowly dawned on her that she did not have a team of elephants tap-dancing on her skull and her eyes did not feel like marbles made of brimstone. She had never really had one before, but she'd heard of them - at great length over many pots of coffee and a bottle of aspirin - from her friends, so it was the absence of a hangover that convinced her she had happened into this situation independent of any mind altering substances.

So where was she? The last thing she remembered, she was aiming a bow at a lizard... no wait, she had arrived at the House of the Moon, hadn't she? And Sesshoumaru had insulted her for five minutes before noticing that she was only seconds from collapse, and then he had apparently taken pity on her and put her in this room. And he had been, quite prettily, half-naked.

Oh, god.

Kagome felt the conquering hordes of embarrassment thunder across her face coupled with a slight, spreading warmth low in her belly that was probably best to ignore.

Stupid maidenly sensibilities, she thought grouchily. I should have rid myself of you at the first opportunity. The fact that she really could not remember when the first or last opportunity had been, or with who - except perhaps, and this was a depressing thought, for Kouga - just cast a gloomy grey cloud over her already less-than-chipper mood.

On the other hand, though her muscles were throbbing and she was having trouble feeling her feet, she was in Sesshoumaru's house.

That meant she was safe.

At the realization, intense relief crested and crashed into her. Holy shit, she thought, stunned. I actually made it!

Of course, there was still the whole 'train as warrior miko and defeat the bad guys' thing to handle, but Kagome decided to ignore that for the time being in favor of a small mental celebration over at least one hurdle cleared.

I'm number one! I'm number one! her brain chanted, obviously drunk with victory, causing her to briefly reconsider her state of coherence. Perhaps she hadn't had enough sleep, after all.

Studying the shadows cast upon the ceiling and against the wall, Kagome decided that it didn't matter. She was awake now, and through the window she could see the sun sinking low in its lazy, late-afternoon languor, casting flat yellow light into her temporary room.

Kagome stretched and sat up, forgetting that she happened to be naked, save for a pair of panties.

"Urk!" she squeaked, pulling the sheet against her in maidenly instinct, even though there was no one around to see.

Still. It felt weird being so exposed in an unfamiliar place. Nervously, Kagome cast about for her clothes, only to find them neatly folded at the foot of her bed. Still clutching the sheet against her, she scooted towards the neat little pile.

Someone had washed them, because even without picking them up she caught a whiff of the fresh, clean scent. Curiously, Kagome wondered who had been so solicitous as to do such a thing - she hastily banished the brief, slightly hysterical vision of Sesshoumaru, hair tucked beneath a handkerchief, sleeves tied back, and up to his elbows in laundry, that flashed across her mind - before she remembered that he was apparently fabulously well-to-do, and therefore had servants. She reached for her haori.

The sudden swell of youki was her only warning; she barely had time to sit back with the sheet clutched around her before the door slammed open, and a sour-faced female youkai glared inside, angrily swishing her two fluffy tails behind her. For a moment, Kagome thought she looked familiar before she placed her as the servant who had put her in this room to begin with.

Kagome stared at her, bewildered.

Her visitor did not seem to be in the mood for chit-chat. "The master ordered you to have a bath," the youkai said sullenly before tossing something white at Kagome, who barely had the presence of mind to put a hand out and catch it awkwardly. It was cloth, and she felt it brush over her bare arm before she was able to shake it out to find herself staring at a thin yukata.

"Um," she ventured, just as the youkai slammed the door shut.

Even more uneasy than before, Kagome shrugged into the garment and tied it securely around her, the brush of cotton over her bare skin still making her feel exposed. After a moment of brief deliberation she grabbed her clothes before rising and, almost as an afterthought, she picked up the wakazashi from where it rested against her backpack. With rather more caution than necessary, she began inching uncertainly toward the door, behind which she could still feel the youkai waiting for her.

As soon as she touched the door it flew back, and the youkai was already walking away with long strides. Kagome felt a curl of panic in her stomach, realizing that Sesshoumaru was nowhere to be seen; she was alone in this house, surrounded by youkai.

On raw, sore feet, she limped after her escort.

By the time they stopped Kagome was sure her feet were leaking pus again, and she was counting her steps in an attempt to take her mind off the pain. She'd reached thirty-six before the youkai halted abruptly and threw another door open, revealing a small, dimly lit room.

In the center sat a basin. Next to it sat a rag, a piece of cloth, and a lump of soap.

The youkai was glaring at her, clearly impatient for Kagome to get inside, so, hesitantly, she stepped forward, beginning to feel ever so slightly put-out. It was like Sesshoumaru rubbed off on everyone around them, as if he had some kind of jerk virus, though at the sound of the door once again sliding to a sharp stop in its frame she reconsidered her uncharitable thoughts. She couldn't really remember a time when Sesshoumaru had been so rude - except for those couple of times he tried to kill her - and he had been almost amiable by the end of their journey the last time she had been here.

Stepping out of the yukata and shuffling off her panties, Kagome let her brow crease slightly in a frown; when had she last been here? She wasn't even certain how much time had passed between then and now, though it couldn't have been that long - they were still right up against the end of the Sengoku-Jidai, nearly in the Edo period, the way it had been last time.

Kagome determined to ask Sesshoumaru just as she slipped into the bath only to find it merely tepid.

"Eep!" she squeaked at the sudden chill against her skin, mind forcibly brought back to more important things, like bathing and getting out as quickly as possible.

Maybe she was offending sensitive youkai noses, and that was why the air in the house was so heavy and ominous. Quickly, Kagome scrubbed herself down vigorously, trying to remove all the dirt and grime from her journey while at the same time attempting stay as warm as possible. Eventually she gave up trying to maintain a minimum body temperature and let her teeth chatter intermittently as she miserably soaped and rinsed her hair before climbing out and drying herself as best she could.

Running unhappy fingers through her tangled locks, Kagome wondered how the hell Sesshoumaru kept his stupid hair in such good shape with such poor soap.

It probably had something to do with being a youkai, though what that might be she couldn't guess. Intellectually, she knew Sesshoumaru's true form was completely different from the one he usually wore. Therefore he obviously had some control over what he looked like, but how much he actually commanded was impossible to know.

Nevertheless, maybe it had something to do with that. Good hair care through telekinesis.

Kagome sighed as she tied herself into her clothes, her still-wet hair soaking through the fabric of her haori and dampening her shoulders. At least the bath was something, though she had a sneaking suspicion that Sesshoumaru had not specified lukewarm water; that was probably all the doing of his servants, who, what little she had seen of them, had not reacted favorably to her.

Well, she didn't blame the guards. She'd almost been killed by them when she had arrived, and she would have been cold by now if she had not staggered at the precise moment to remove her from the path of the arrow they had shot. It turned out that being shot at was a terrific way to wake up, and it had galvanized her into a tired jog, her bow and arrow seeming to ready themselves on their own, her fear igniting them with incandescent purity.

That had certainly grabbed their attention; they'd scattered like bits of pointy, demonic dust before her advance. That had probably not made the best of impressions.

It didn't explain the dirty looks from the youkai appointed to tend her, but maybe it was some kind of youkai brotherhood thing of which she had previously been unaware; injure one, injure them all, and all that jazz.

Bending, Kagome gingerly worked her sore feet into her tabi - thankfully also cleaned - and sighed with resignation at the simultaneously stinging and soothing feel of cloth against her raw skin. They didn't hurt as much as they had when she

had gone to sleep, but she still hissed at the pressure she was forced to put on them in order to walk.

Holding her head up high and trying not to think deep thoughts in case that made her weigh more, Kagome walked as lightly as possible to the door, slid it open, and stepped into the polished hallway.

There were youkai around, but she couldn't see them, which made her extremely uneasy, and worriedly she peered left, then right, unsure of what to do. She felt as though she were being watched.

Nothing happened. After a moment of wavering, Kagome began to get irritated at her unseen spectator. She was clearly clueless, but he or she - or they - did not seem terribly inclined to point her in the right direction.

How rude.

Mouth twisting with annoyance, Kagome frowned and turned to her left, the direction she had come from when she had left her room.

Within no time she was lost. Mentally she cursed Sesshoumaru's decorator for making every room and every hallway look exactly the same, and she was certain she had seen the tops of heads darting back behind corners when she turned around too quickly. Rapidly becoming fed up, Kagome stopped in the middle of a remarkably nondescript hallway, took a deep breath, and closed her eyes.

She couldn't find her room, but there was only one daiyoukai in the house, and if she could find him, she would probably be all right.

Trying to shut out distractions, she concentrated on the feeling of youki; she'd never been good at detecting it, but Sesshoumaru was powerful and distinctive, unlike the youkai she was positive were following her. Within a minute she was fairly certain of his location, and, still focused on him, she set off down the hallway again.

After only a minute or two, Kagome found herself in a completely unexpected garden.

It was quite lovely as gardens went, but still a complete surprise. Somehow, she hadn't really thought Sesshoumaru to be one to moon about in flower beds, but, she supposed, everyone had their little quirks.

She cast her glance about the garden, looking for his form, and her eyes actually slid over him a few times before she finally realized she was seeing his knee poking out from behind a wide trunk, beneath a tree full of fuzzy pink and purple blossoms. He appeared to be watching the sun, now setting. Kagome wondered if he knew she was there, and hesitated a moment before walking across the well tended grasses to his chosen seat.

She swung wide around the tree so she wouldn't startle him if he had not detected her presence, and when he finally came into view, she stopped, uncertain as to how she should proceed.

He looked a little naked, and she puzzled over the impression before she realized he still wasn't wearing any armor, and she found it a little funny that he should appear less naked when he was stripped to the waist than when he was fully clothed.

Kagome narrowed her eyes as she studied him. Before, she thought he might have been sleeping for all the attention he cast her way, but he was awake. He simply did not seem inclined to acknowledge her, and Kagome stood there, feeling increasingly disjointed and out of place; it seemed, almost fancifully, that he was the only thing she had keeping her in touch with the world around her, and she did not want to think about what would happen if he were to reject her. Biting her lip, Kagome looked down at where her fingers were fiddling with her sleeves, and frowned.

"Whose blood was that?"

The sound of his voice caused her to start almost violently, tearing her eyes away from her hands to find him staring at her. "What?" she asked, confused. Timidly she took a few steps toward him.

The youkai lord raised a brow and looked at her sternly before she saw his eyes

wander to her breasts.

Kagome squirmed.

"Whose blood stained your haori?" he asked again, and, looking down, Kagome remembered the dark brown blotches that had marred the normally white fabric.

"Er, no one's," she answered, suddenly embarrassed. Sesshoumaru made an impatient noise in the back of his throat, and she looked up to find him glaring at her. His eyes could have sliced golden wounds across her skin.

"I will not ask you again," he said.

Kagome frowned, wondering why he had to be so irritating. "It was just some soldier's blood," she snapped. "So no one's, like I said."

"And what was a soldier doing bleeding all over you?" he asked.

Kagome thought he sounded like her father might have, demanding to know why she had broken curfew, or talked back to her mother, or streaked at her graduation. "Hey," she said sharply, "what are you insinuating? For your information, he was bleeding because I broke his nose."

To her satisfaction, that appeared to draw him up short. A tiny crease appeared between his eyebrows. "How?" Sesshoumaru wondered aloud.

Kagome felt another swell of sluggish annoyance. "With this," she said, and drew the wakazashi, scabbard and all, from its place at her hip as she stalked over to where he sat beneath the tree. Stiffly, she thrust it out in front of her in a graceless offering. Sliding his hands from his sleeves, he took it from her and inspected it with a sharp glance.

Studying the scabbard, Sesshoumaru narrowed his eyes, inhaling deeply. Beneath his fingers, the intricate wood felt smooth and polished, and there was, indeed, a tiny drop of dried blood on it, caught in one of the grooves.

Truly, she was full of surprises, and not all of them pleasant. It did not take a

wealth of imagination for one to know why she would be forced to break a man's nose, and Sesshoumaru was beginning to feel that strange and impotent restlessness that only afflicted him when he was finding out important bits of intelligence only after the point when they could have been useful. Distantly, he felt himself clench his jaw in a curious, low-burning rage when it dawned on him that he was entering dangerously emotional territory.

Sesshoumaru forcibly calmed himself before handing the sword back to her. He watched as she took it from his hands and slid it into place, the motion slightly awkward.

When it was secured to her satisfaction, she turned back to him, looking down, strange thoughts that he could not identify flitting across her face. "I think your servants are spying on me," she said bluntly.

His brows drew down dangerously, but he did not respond to her declaration.

"Sit," he told her instead, a small nod indicating that her place was next to him at the foot of the tree.

She looked down at him, confused, but after a moment's hesitation she closed the distance between them. When she was next to him beneath the tree, Kagome nervously lowered herself to the ground, tucking her feet beneath her to mimic his posture. After a moment she shifted, trying to find a comfortable position for her blistered soles, finally settling for less-than-perfect form and looking up at him, waiting for his reaction to her announcement.

There was a short silence, but in the end she was not disappointed. She saw Sesshoumaru narrow his eyes as he stared at the sun, sinking lower in the sky. "They are trying to figure out what you are," he said.

Confusion. "Um," Kagome said. "Okay? Please clarify."

She thought she saw the barest of twitches at the corner of his mouth, but it might have been a trick of the light. "You smell human, but you mentioned my half-breed brother," he said.

"Hey," she protested feebly at the use of the word half-breed, but he cut her off.

"It is well known that he died over half a century ago, but you are not old enough to have known him."

Then he pitched his voice so low she almost didn't hear it. "I advise that you not indicate in any way why that is so," he murmured.

Kagome frowned worriedly and nodded. "All right," she said. "But... why?"

Sesshoumaru slid his eyes to her.

She looked so breakable to him, her damp hair shining black and bronze, the bones beneath her pale golden skin as fragile as glass in the right hands. If her humanity were established without a doubt it would take nothing to injure her; his faithless allies and his out-right enemies would want to do so without a thought, in an attempt to weaken him, and his true allies, his friends, his servants... they would kill her in order to keep him strong. They would think it would be the loyal thing to do.

She had no refuge.

To his surprise, Sesshoumaru had to fight the sudden, vaguely hungry urge to push her back against the tree and curve himself around her, to shield her with his body, had to fight the urge to sink his teeth into her and not let go. It would be so easy to fail...

"Sesshoumaru?" The sudden movement of her lips startled him, and he realized he had been staring. He frowned, trying to shake off his doubts, and looked away.

"They are worried about our association," he said, eyes finding the gilded clouds. "Already one of my vassals is aware of your presence, and your humanity will seem to those under my reign as history repeating itself. They will wish to... exploit that."

For a moment, Kagome did not understand what he was saying, but when it hit her, she felt a sinuous cold snake along her spine. History repeating...

Her heart seized in her chest. "Oh, god," she blurted, looking away from him to stare at nothing. "I am so sorry. I didn't think - I'd forgotten - " she swallowed, angry with herself. "I didn't mean to cause you trouble. I should leave."

Surprised, Sesshoumaru shot her a sharp glance. "That is not permitted," he informed her.

She looked up at him. "Who are you to tell me what to do?" she demanded hotly, and he realized that she was not thinking of herself at all. If only she would, once in a while, she probably would not end up half-dead and vulnerable so often.

A thunderous scowl crossed his face at the memory of her hunched figure. "For one," he said, "you are still exhausted. You slept for a full day - " obviously ignorant of this fact, he heard her gasp " - and you are injured from your journey. And for another, the threat of purification will only hold so much sway against those who seek to overthrow me." He turned away so he would not have to see her face. "To leave without protection is to go looking for your own death," he finished quietly.

To his shock, she did not seem to care about this. "That's my fault, then, isn't it?" she snapped, and he angled a perplexed gaze in her direction. "I should have thought of that, so it's my problem now. God, I just don't think sometimes."

Sesshoumaru blinked. "That is certainly true," he agreed, bewildered. It seemed impossible that she was more upset about inconveniencing him than about her suddenly far more perilous life, but that appeared to be the case.

Kagome was too busy kicking herself for being so foolish to care about Sesshoumaru's befuddlement; she couldn't believe she had done this to him, and all because she was too scared to take care of her own problems. Stupid, stupid, she thought.

Of all the people in the world, she should have been the first one to realize the implications of her humanity on his life, and now, without even realizing it, she'd brought bad fortune on him again.

She had never, ever wanted to do that. Feeling miserably foolish, Kagome stared at her hands and tried to think of some way to mitigate the damage.

Sesshoumaru watched with trepidation as she stared at the ground, frowning with frustration at herself, until she sat up straight and looked him in the eye.

"This isn't your problem," she announced. "You have no obligation to me."

For some reason, that announcement stung. "Do not be foolish," he said, turning away. "The damage is done."

"But - "

"This conversation is over. It has already been decided: it matters not why you are here, or what you have to do. When you leave, you will not go alone."

The declaration hung heavy in the air between them.

Sesshoumaru turned inward.

All day, and most of the night before, he had wrestled with the problem of her. When they had been together and alone, away from his territory, the danger was minimal, but now - now she was deep within his domain, and she had landed more conspicuously in the middle of his life than he had ever feared. She was an enormous problem, one that drew all other problems to her, one that focused all things upon herself, and that meant it was all but inevitable that his authority and dominance would be once again challenged.

Sooner or later - hopefully later - he would have to fight again, and when he did, he needed her to be safely out of the way. She was a distraction.

The decision had been a hard one, and, though he would never admit it, he was still torn. To leave would be to assure himself of her safety, but would expose his house to the possibility of attack; to stay would be to secure his lands, but place her in danger. He wanted to do neither of those things.

In the end, though, he had decided that he would go with her. It was a calculated

risk, but it was the best option available. He was strong, and his lands would always be there, but Kagome was human, and brief, and her death at the hands of an enemy would be a victory - both real and symbolic - over him. He could not allow that to happen.

Kagome saw him blink slowly, far away, and she could feel the blood draining from her cheeks. For a long moment she was silent; the implication of what he was saying sinking ever further in, and she turned to stare at the ground, heart twisting around on itself.

"But if you leave," she said quietly, finally, "your house will be vulnerable."

"I am aware of that," he said, almost dreamily. "However, its defenses are significantly better now than in the past."

He did not have to tell her that this was no guarantee, and she wasn't about to let him pretend.

"But you don't have to leave."

Even as she said it, her fear squeezed down on her lungs, leaving her limp and dizzy, but it was true. He was not responsible for her. "I'm not all weak; I've managed well enough up until now. You know they will only try to hurt me because they think it would get to you, so if you let me go by myself then they'll see that our, er, alliance is not... personal. There would be no profit in killing me."

Sesshoumaru stared into the distance, not seeing anything.

It was true, of course. What she said was true. The thought had crossed his mind, but he had not seriously entertained this line of argument, as it seemed terribly risky. Now, however, he considered it.

To stay would be a calculated risk as well; to go would indicate her worth, while leaving her unguarded would imply there was nothing to be gained by her death. She might be safer were she to leave his home alone.

And yet...

Might.

There were still some who might kill her for the sport of it as well, though the possibility was small.

But they might, and with a feeling of hollow dread, Sesshoumaru realized that he was unwilling to leave her to chance. Injury to her would affect him. His household might be able to fend for itself, but she could not. In the end, it came down to one simple question, and at the thought of it a cold dismay oozed down his spine.

Would he rather throw his lands into disarray than leave her unprotected?

Would he rather be forced to war again than risk her death?

Slowly, sluggishly, Sesshoumaru withdrew his hands from his sleeves and stared down at his claws, feeling chilled to the bone, fighting the growing sense of doom, of inevitability, of fate, and, dimly, he wondered what his father would have decided, what his father would have advised him to do.

Really, though, he didn't have to wonder. He already knew.

The heaviness of eyes rested upon him, and Sesshoumaru felt bent beneath the knowledge that his servants were spying on them, were looking for a sign of weakness from him.

He didn't blame them. In some way, they were all trying to read the future, and if he were to falter then they would perish. They were waiting for him to touch her, or to smile, or to do anything at all that would seem as though they were more than merely allies.

Which, in the end, was the crux of the problem: they were more than allies.

He had missed her.

Sesshoumaru had not fully understood the gravity of that feeling when he had

first admitted it, but now - now, he knew.

His enemies would kill her to get to him, but his allies would murder her in order to eliminate her, as if she were a weakness and, to his horror, he knew they would not be mistaken. He had made her into a frailty, as if he had peeled off his skin, as if he had broken his bones and thrown them aside to expose his heart.

It would be so easy for someone - anyone - to strike.

For some strange, terrifying reason that he did not fully understand, he wanted to turn to her and gather her to him; he wanted to keep her from the eyes he knew were watching them. He wanted to... to --

Sesshoumaru felt as though he were hovering, looking down on himself from a great height.

Did he truly value her more than he valued his peace?

A movement caught his eye, and, he turned to see Kagome absently, fretfully running her hand through her damp hair. To his mounting despair, his eyes unwillingly followed her ministrations, and she winced as she combed out a tangle, her mild discomfort only intensifying the dangerous, bittersweet urge to touch her.

Then she tossed her hair over her shoulder, revealing her slender, lovely throat.

Sesshoumaru closed his eyes.

Then again, what did it matter? He valued his pleasure, for it was so hard to come by, and she was nothing, nothing to him except, perhaps, that it pleased him to be with her. And Sesshoumaru always did what he pleased.

He opened his eyes again and turned a dark glance upon her. "You will not leave unless I am with you," he said, and his voice was hard and implacable.

He watched as Kagome turned, startled, and gazed up at him with a strange, half-comprehending awe.

Then he saw her lips twitch, slightly, and in the golden light of the rising darkness she smiled at him.

And Sesshoumaru found he could not look away.

[As wind in dry grass, or rat's feet over broken glass: There is something I keep forgetting to do, and that is thank everyone who has voted for this story (and others of mine) in the various contests on the 'net, specifically at the iyfanguild and at SingleSpark. It's terribly flattering to be nominated, seconded, and - I'm not going to lie - to win. Thank you so much to everyone!

As for this chapter's dedication... originally I hated this chapter so very much that I wasn't going to saddle anyone with getting such a crap chapter to call their own, but at the last minute (or rather, last friday, I think) all was redeemed when Technoelfie so kindly gifted the world with an absolutely fabulous rendition of Sesshoumaru's desk and our heros' subsequent conversation regarding it, which appears in this chapter. You'll know it when you see it, and there's a link to her lovely drawing in my ffnet author profile and in the SingleSpark Author's Notes. So! Instead of hating this chapter with the firey burning of a thousand suns, I like this chapter a lot now. This is simply amazing to me, because I really, really hated this chapter, but now? Not so much! Amazing what a bit of kindness can do for the soul. Or self-esteem. Whatever. Anyway, if you don't know who Technoelfie is, you're totally missing out. Go visit her devArt page and ooh and aaah! Elfie, thank you, thank you, thank you; you made my month and that means so much to me. (Also you didn't laugh while I struggled to understand grammars - too kind, my dear, too kind.)]

Tales from the House of the Moon
by
Resmiranda

Chapter Twenty-Seven

"The only thing men learn from history is that men never learn anything from history."
-- Hegel

* * *

It only took the space of about five heartbeats, staring at Kagome in the fading light of the sunset, for Sesshoumaru to reach three revelations.

Revelation number one, he thought to himself gloomily. It is, perhaps, theoretically possible that I might be an idiot.

It was a discouraging conclusion to say the least - one that he had previously considered to be unthinkable - and yet the fact of the matter remained that he had made a mistake. Worse, he appeared to have made the same stupid, short-sighted blunder twice now within the span of approximately half a century, and as a man unaccustomed to making mistakes - and, if he did make them, they were to be learned from and not repeated - Sesshoumaru could only surmise that he had some sort of learning disability hitherto undetected. It was the only explanation he could think of to explain this new, disastrous attachment he had developed to this human girl whose company he enjoyed and who was still smiling at him, which only served to reinforce revelation number two.

Which was that, despite the peril inherent in continuing with said attachment, he found himself remarkably disinclined to rectify this problem in a simple, straightforward fashion. Of course, there were any number of ways to cleanly and efficiently disengage himself from Kagome, but he didn't want to, and as his wants were paramount he was just going to have to be comfortable with the new complications that followed behind her. Not to mention he had the sneaking suspicion that his newfound affinity for annoying, troublesome mikos with beautiful smiles would preclude any of the dark solutions to the situation that tickled the edge of his mind.

Hurriedly, Sesshoumaru shoved aside those vague suggestions. They were each

unacceptable to him, so he was just going to have to learn to live with this problem; it was not like he had a choice about it, anyway.

Still, neither revelation number one nor revelation number two were nearly so exasperating as revelation number three, which was that he could almost hear his father informing him of his thoughts concerning this turn of events.

There was nothing in the world, Sesshoumaru decided, quite like hearing the voice of one's dead father gleefully chanting, "I told you so, I told you so!" over and over in one's head.

Though his father probably would not have been nearly so childish as to rub Sesshoumaru's sensitive nose in this particularly piquant mess, that didn't stop the little voice that sounded remarkably like his father from putting in its two cents on the issue.

"Not so easy, is it son?" he was saying. "Never thought you'd follow in my footsteps, did you?" he was saying. "Sorry you treated Izayoi and Inuyasha so badly now, aren't you?" he was saying.

No, Sesshoumaru thought sullenly, intensely displeased that this answer could apply to all three questions. On the other hand, if his father had ever been inclined to listen to what anyone else had to say, Sesshoumaru certainly would have qualified that he still didn't think he would follow in his father's footsteps. This situation was not the same as his father's situation.

At all.

Yes, he had grown to enjoy her company, and yes, it pleased him to have her alive, but that did not mean he was about to toss everything away as his father had so foolishly done. There were any number of contrasts to their respective situations, though, for some reason, the fact that Kagome was nothing like Izayoi seemed to stick out in his mind the most.

And, of course, it went without saying that he had not courted her, bedded her, given her a child, nor fallen in love with her, and he was just going to stop this line of thought right now because it could not end any way but badly.

In fact, Sesshoumaru decided, it might be better if he just stopped thinking about the situation altogether because the direction it had taken was becoming extremely uncomfortable, not to mention highly unsettling. Besides, thinking too deeply about matters only left him confused so he generally avoided it, a course of action that had served him passably well up to this point.

Yes, that was probably the best thing to do. Satisfied with his decision to refrain from further forays into the cognitive arts, Sesshoumaru allowed himself a small sigh of relief, feeling, for some reason, as if he had narrowly escaped something.

"Sesshoumaru? Are you all right?"

Sesshoumaru blinked, confused and off balance at the sound, before his eyes focused once more on Kagome, who had stopped smiling. He blinked again, this time in annoyance with himself for drifting off course.

Next to him, Kagome shifted under his gaze, wondering just what he was thinking. "Only you look like you've seen a ghost," she added by way of explanation, feeling incredibly nervous.

She couldn't help but feel that he was acting rather odd; he seemed to have become lost in thought, and when she had pulled him out of it the expression on his face as he looked at her was uncharacteristically telling.

He looked... almost shocked, as if he had just seen something for the first time and recognized it. On top of the fact that the stare was directed at her, Sesshoumaru was very rarely shocked; that he should be so now was making her stomach flutter strangely, and she didn't need that on top of the heavy, guilty gratitude and sharp apprehension his declaration had inspired. Not to mention that his tense demeanor and dark reticence were growing ever more unsettling; she was used to his boredom and his dry remarks, and the fact that he seemed to have regressed to the insufferably regal hauteur that she had first seen in him was discouraging.

Come on, she thought anxiously. Say something!

She saw him tilt his head and his brows draw down just a little, as if he were suddenly suspicious.

Kagome was in no mood to endure his cryptic expressions. Her mouth twisted. "Also you've been staring at me for almost a minute and a half," she continued, a little sharply. "It's kind of weird."

Not, Kagome admitted to herself, that being the object of his gaze was unpleasant - it did, in fact, stir the strange, low fluttering in her belly that had been so dangerously insistent whenever she had thought of him for the past nine months - but it was beginning to get a little strange. Even if he did not inspire such feelings in her, being subjected to such an intense stare was enough to put anyone off their stride, and she wasn't feeling particularly sharp to begin with.

Abruptly the expression fled from his face. Kagome watched as Sesshoumaru's features melted easily into a scowl - they'd had a lot of practice, after all - and turned away from her quickly. He appeared to consider her statement for a moment. Then without preamble he suddenly unfolded his body and rose to his feet.

Startled, Kagome stood up as well, though considerably less gracefully. Patiently she waited for him to speak, but he did not. After a moment Kagome occupied herself with attempting to surreptitiously brush the dirt from her behind.

"I believe," Sesshoumaru suddenly said, startling her out of her hakama maintenance and causing her to look up at him, "that our business would be better conducted in my study."

"Why?" Kagome wanted to know, unhappy with the thought of more walking and trying in vain to follow his train of thought.

Sesshoumaru looked at her from the corner of his eye. "Unless you wish to sit in the dark?" he asked, and she breathed a sigh of relief at his tone. It was almost facetious.

For a moment, Kagome considered saying that yes, she did want to sit around in the dark with him, but decided against it lest someone - such as herself - get the

wrong idea. Instead she shrugged and followed him as he turned and strode across the lawn to the house, where a servant was lighting the lamps hanging from the eaves.

Three minutes later they were standing in his study.

Kagome, who had been too exhausted to take notice of much of anything yesterday, was staring in dubious fascination at the blizzard of papers that covered Sesshoumaru's desk.

Sesshoumaru tried to capture her attention as subtly as possible. When her eyes fluttered to him he gave her an ominous look, as though daring her to say something about his personal organizational habits.

She didn't say anything, though, just turned back to his atrociously unkempt desk and stared, seemingly entranced.

Sesshoumaru frowned. "Do you find my desk so engaging?" he asked dryly.

Kagome jumped a little, eyes snapping back to his face. "Um, not really," she said. "It's just that I think I expected you to be more..."

He raised a quelling eyebrow, but instead of discouraging her it only seemed to spur her onward. She grinned at him.

"I expected you to be more meticulous than this," she told him. "This looks like my brother's bedroom."

"Your brother's bedroom is covered in land treaties?" Sesshoumaru asked, feeling a sudden, perverse need to be disingenuous. "I had no idea your family was so influential."

Oh, she thought, so now we're joking again? "That's not what I meant, and you know it," she told him.

"Do I?" he wondered out loud, and she saw his shoulders melt ever so slightly, as though he had just wound down.

"What, you mean you don't know everything?" she teased. "I don't know what

to believe in now."

Sesshoumaru refrained from closing his eyes. Exasperating woman, he thought. Why did I miss her, again? He looked down his nose at the girl standing next to him and tried to pin her with a glare, though it seemed to have little effect. "Do not make me reconsider my hospitality," he said severely.

Her grin only expanded. "Throw me out, then," she dared him.

The youkai only glowered more, apparently finding nothing to say to that. With what she considered to be admirable restraint, Kagome declined to do a victory lap around the room. Not to mention that, considering the way he appeared to be grinding his teeth, such a move would probably have had a severe impact on her longevity anyway.

Abruptly, Sesshoumaru turned away, seeming to write the past few minutes' exchange out of the universe for the sake of his pride, and lowered himself down on one of the several cushions placed in front of his desk, which Kagome assumed were usually reserved for supplicants seeking his favor. When he indicated that she should sit opposite him with a sharp, meaningful glance, she shrugged and made a great show of preparing to sit, checking the fabric as surreptitiously as possible for bloodstains.

When she was finally settled to her satisfaction, she looked up at him expectantly.

Deliberately, Sesshoumaru folded his hands into his sleeves. "Now," he said imperiously, "tell me why you are here."

Kagome blinked, thinking that, for Sesshoumaru, this sounded remarkably philosophical until she realized that she still had not told him about her mission. "Oh!" she exclaimed. "Well... I'm not quite certain where to begin." Frowning, she tried to think back over the past week. Her encounter with the madoushi had taken on a very dreamlike quality, dim and misted over, and she found it difficult to remember it clearly. It had been such a raw experience. She had been so terrified that she would be injured, perhaps permanently scarred, badly wounded, stranded on some straw pallet for a week while she fought off infection, that when she tried to remember it clearly the effort made

her feel as if someone had skinned her brain. Add that to the grueling five day trek from Edo to the western coastline, now hopelessly blurred beyond all recognition in her mind, and she felt a headache forming as she tried to determine the important parts of the story.

After a moment of sifting through the strange bits of flotsam drifting by on her stream of consciousness she gave up and dove in.

"I read another fairytale, and it sounded like me. I couldn't be certain of course until I jumped into the well, but it was a really distressing story, and... well, it was true. And the miko in the story was me." Kagome watched as his eyelids lowered fractionally, clearly bored.

"And?" he said abruptly.

"Oh!" Kagome jumped, realizing that she had trailed off. She frowned at the floor in front of her. "Well, I guess the gist of it is that there's a sorceress in Edo, and she's... I don't know, released a plague on the village, or something," she finally said. She looked up to gauge his reaction to this.

"A plague?" he asked, arching a brow. "What sort of plague?"

Kagome shook her head. "I don't know," she confessed. "The story I read said that it was an influenza outbreak, but I've never seen influenza like that. Usually it's a fever and maybe an upset stomach, but this was worse. People were dying."

Sesshoumaru frowned inwardly. He had never heard of this disease. "People do not die from influenza?" he said quizzically, almost tripping over the strange word.

Kagome didn't appear to notice his slight difficulty. "No," she replied, "people do die from it..."

- Kikyou and Inuyasha, for instance, she remembered suddenly, they died from a flu outbreak, or something very much like it -

"But this was different," she forced herself to say. Briefly, a shuddering memory of the sad rows of corpses arrayed against the forest flashed across

her mind. She had seen many dead people, and many of them had died in horrible, bloody ways, but this, somehow, was worse than all of those dim-remembered visions. It made her sick to think of it, not because it was the most horrible thing she had seen, but because it was the most horrible thing for which she had ever been responsible. Even when she had shattered the shikon no tama, there had been Inuyasha to help her shoulder the burden.

This, though... she had to fix this on her own, and she didn't even know what illness had struck down the people of Edo. Even if she did defeat the madoushi, she had no idea how to treat the ones who would still be ill. They wouldn't get better immediately, would they? That wasn't how the world worked, was it?

Sesshoumaru seemed to pick up on her confusion and unease. "How do you know it was different?" he asked.

Wrinkling her nose, she could almost taste that horrifying stench. "I'm pretty sure it wasn't the flu, since I've never seen flu patients look like that. This illness makes people a little more... oozy," she said carefully, certain that she did not want to discuss the particulars of blood-laced shit with him. Sure, they had slogged through dragon intestines together, but somehow it just seemed crude to actually talk about it.

Blinking at her, Sesshoumaru decided not to press the matter and sighed softly. "So there is a plague and a sorceress," he said instead. "What is your objective?"

She shot him a look that clearly meant she was having very pointed speculations concerning his mental acuity, but she did not voice those speculations out loud. "To fight and defeat the madoushi and her god," she said, as if it were obvious.

Sesshoumaru ignored her tone and her glance, instead grabbing onto a passing word. "God?" he said.

Kagome nodded. "She gets her power from some kind of sinister spirit. It gives her the power she needs to work her spells, I think, and then it feeds on the misery she creates with those spells." He saw her shudder visibly. "I could feel it all over the city," she added, voice trailing away. "I could feel it watching me."

"Is it watching you now?" Sesshoumaru asked.

"No. But I think it was watching me as I traveled."

He looked rather displeased at that thought.

"I can't feel it any longer," Kagome hastened to reassure him, though she doubted he needed any such assurance. "It faded as I got further away from Edo. I don't think it knows where to find me."

Sesshoumaru only nodded, seemingly thoughtful. "Why did you not defeat the madoushi when you first came through the well?" he asked, not unreasonably.

Biting her lip Kagome looked away from him, feeling mildly ashamed, though she had no idea why she should feel that way. After all, she simply hadn't had the time or resources to learn the things she needed to do. She'd grown very good with the bow, and Kaede and Miroku had taught her one or two useful things, but ultimately she was completely clueless, both in combat and in the spiritual arts.

"I'm not ready," she said, glancing back at him.

She was slightly dismayed and quite annoyed when he gave her a very old look. "You jumped into battle without a plan or proper training," he stated.

Kagome glared at him. "It's not my fault," she said. "I just never had time, or anyone to really teach me!"

"What do you have to do to defeat them?"

She turned back to look at the tatami mat in front of her, which seemed to have grown terribly engaging. "Learn one-on-one combat and how to seal things. I have to incapacitate the sorceress just long enough to seal the god," she informed him.

"And how are you supposed to do that?"

"Training, I guess. But I don't have long; I don't need to be great at it, I just

need to be good enough." Kagome bit her lip. It would be nice to learn more about her power, but annoying to learn weapons, and she didn't have any idea how she was going to do that.

Sesshoumaru pursed his lips slightly, suppressing a frown. "How do you plan to go about doing this?" he wondered aloud, obviously thinking along the same lines.

He watched as she shrugged, still staring blankly at the floor in front of her. "I guess I have to find an older, more experienced miko to train me. Which is why it would not be a good idea to go with me," she added, giving it one last reluctant shot.

Kagome could almost feel his annoyed amusement when he snorted at the notion. "I do not fear mikos," he said.

In her mind, Kagome very slowly banged her head against the ground. Her gaze shot to his face. "Not for you," she said, exasperated. "For me. It would be bad for me to be traveling with a daiyoukai. I can't prance up to a miko and say, 'Hey, what ho, want to train me, and, oh, by the way, can my youkai bodyguard come with?' Oh, yes, I'm sure that will end well."

"I am your ally, not your bodyguard," Sesshoumaru reminded her with a trace of annoyance in his voice. "I do not serve you."

Kagome waved a hand, clearly not about to let his pride get in the way of her point. "I mean," she continued, "it's bad enough that I'll be asking her to train me for nothing - I don't know what having a youkai lord with me will do. It's not like you'd be welcome in a shrine, you know."

Sniffing, Sesshoumaru raised his chin fractionally. "And," he said dryly, "I suppose that you will fight those that will come after you on your own?"

She stared at him as her train of thought ground to a halt. Oh, right, she thought to herself, that whole mutiny thing. It really was amazing to her how easily she seemed to forget that she was in fairly immediate danger, and she wondered why she continuously did so.

For his part, if he hadn't been so annoyed with her continued resistance to

him Sesshoumaru might have been amused at her sudden silence. As it was he simply seized the opportunity to further convince her of the need for his company. Not that he was going to listen to anything she said on the subject anyway, but it would probably cut down on the amount of self-sacrificing gestures in the future, and that was always good for all involved.

"At any rate," he continued, absentmindedly picking a bit of imaginary lint from his sleeve, "for some reason I would wager that whoever trains you might perhaps be appreciative of the fact that there will be no youkai attacks for the duration of your training."

Kagome scowled. He noticed that her hands, resting on her knees, clenched into fists. "I already told you that you don't have an obligation to me," she said.

Sesshoumaru shrugged. "I find that I rather pleasantly anticipate it," he half-lied. "I have not had an opportunity to kill many things for some time now."

At least this much was true, and, much as her presence inconvenienced him, the knowledge that he could look forward to quite a bit of very satisfying bloodshed in the near future was quite heartening. It was one of the only good things to come out of this horrible mess.

The miko across from him just wrinkled her nose. "Bleah," she opined.

He smirked.

Still making a face at him she shook her head. "All right, you can come with me," she said, as if she had ever had a say in the matter. "Though I still don't think it's a very good idea to ask a miko to train me when I have an alliance with a natural enemy."

Sesshoumaru shrugged again. "It does not matter," he said airily. "The only thing you should be concerned with is just how you are going to find this hypothetical miko."

"Um," Kagome ventured. He watched as she bit her lip, worrying it with her teeth. "You... you wouldn’t happen to know any mikos around here, would you?"

She flashed a sheepish grin.

He almost closed his eyes in exasperation. "Somehow I am beginning to suspect that you have not thought this cunning plan all the way through," he said slowly. For some obscure reason he could feel a painful pressure building behind his left eye.

Kagome had the decency to be abashed. "Ahah," she said, voice strained. "Not as such, no." Then, because she was a little cranky and a little embarrassed, she added, "Is that a problem?" Just to annoy him.

She succeeded in her quest. With a long-suffering sigh he unfolded from his seat and stood before making his way around the desk. With only a little trepidation - who knew what could be under there? - he sat down and began to sift through the drifts, looking for a report that he may or may not have imagined reading some five months ago.

Watching him methodically inspect the mountain of parchment, Kagome wondered how long it would take for him to find whatever it was that he was looking for. Already she was feeling tired again and wanted to return to her temporary quarters; apparently her twenty-four hours of sleep weren't enough for her.

Stupid body, she thought, don't I take good care of you? Can't you hold out for another hour or two?

She yawned. Obviously not.

"Do try to stay upright for a few more minutes," Sesshoumaru said to her, refocusing her attention. "This is, after all, for your benefit." She watched as he grew impatient with his measured actions and swept two months 'worth of household ledgers onto the floor.

Kagome aimed a scowl at him that was, unfortunately, ruined by another yawn. "Hey, I can't help it. I'm tired," she protested feebly.

He gave her a brief glance, and it seemed to her that he was repressing a smile, though his tone revealed nothing. "I can only hope that you will be rested

enough by the time we leave tomorrow morning."

That dragged her out of her sleepy complacency. It felt as though someone had tossed her in a lake of icy water, and Kagome felt her spine sag in protest.

"Leave? Tomorrow?" Even as she said the words, the blisters on the bottom of her soles chafed against the rough fabric of her socks. Across from her Sesshoumaru finally pulled out a sheaf of paper - that, to Kagome's untrained eye, looked exactly like every other sheaf of paper that populated his desk - from beneath some old maps. She watched as he delicately began to leaf through it.

Unwilling to distress her further Sesshoumaru feigned boredom while inside he felt himself twist up at her tone. She was still tired, and she hadn't recovered from her long trek across the land, but that didn't matter; she was in danger, and the best way to ensure her safety would be to leave as soon as possible. He briefly toyed with the idea of telling her that it was all for her own good, but then she would want to know why she wasn't safe in his house and he would have to tell her and then it would just be a mess. Or rather, more of a mess than it was already. Already Sesshoumaru almost missed that stupid bear; the urge to half-kill - or fully kill, he really wasn't picky at this point - was quite strong, not to mention annoyingly out of reach. He grit his teeth.

"Yes, tomorrow," he told her. "As soon as possible."

"Why?" Kagome wanted to know.

Sesshoumaru didn't answer. Instead, he held a document aloft. "We will be leaving and going south and east. There is a powerful miko one days' hard walk from here," he informed her, as if she had not spoken. "She has apparently been giving us some trouble lately."

Uh-huh. While she did not appreciate being ignored, Kagome decided she was too fatigued to argue with him. Passing a weary hand across her face, she sighed. "Do you at least know her name?" she asked tiredly.

He spared a quick glare at the writing on the page and found, to his surprise, that the woman's name was indeed mentioned. Unfortunately that probably meant that she had not just been some trouble but a great deal of trouble. He

felt a flash of annoyance at himself for not seeing to this matter sooner. Ah, well, at least she would serve a useful purpose before he dealt with her.

Kagome was still looking at him expectantly. He glanced back at the paper. "Fuyu," he read aloud. "Her name is Fuyu."

Kagome just nodded, looking thoughtful. Sesshoumaru pretended to reread the document as he waited for her to fill the silence and tell him what was on her mind. Finally she spoke.

"Sesshoumaru?"

He looked up and cocked his head to the side, indicating that he was listening.

She smiled wide at him. "I also need a combat instructor," she announced.

Sesshoumaru gave her a blank look.

Kagome shifted in her seat, appearing a little uncertain. "And... I thought that you might be able to teach me?" she said, optimistically.

To Kagome's intense puzzlement, Sesshoumaru stared at her for one long moment before, very slowly, he lifted a hand and covered his mouth. She saw his eyebrows twitch slightly, just a tiny, involuntary leap.

He was laughing at her.

Huffily Kagome crossed her arms. "What's so funny?" she demanded, chagrined.

He lowered his hand, expression as bored as ever. How the hell does he do that? she wondered sourly. He made a great show of straightening the papers in front of him before folding his hands into his sleeves.

"No," he said, not bothering to answer the second question.

A wave of intense disappointment swept through her. "But why not?" she said, voice rising.

Sesshoumaru put up a hand. She subsided and he returned it to its sleeve.

"First," he said, as though explaining something to a retarded kitten, "you are not youkai."

She blinked, stung. "So?" she demanded. "What does that have to do with anything? Just because I'm not a demon doesn't mean that I can't learn to fight just as - "

"And," he cut her off, voice sharp, "I am youkai."

Irritated Kagome huffed, blowing her bangs out of her face. "I repeat, what does that have to do with anything?"

He shrugged. "Nothing," he said, "unless you do not mind getting killed every five minutes while training."

"You said you didn't kill women and children," she reminded him, not unreasonably.

Frowning with exasperation, he lifted his hand once more to his throbbing temple. "That is not the point," he said, striving to stay as calm as possible. "As my strength is exponentially greater than yours, I will most likely kill you accidentally. Often."

Kagome sat back, looking chastised. "But - "

"And second," he said, "what on earth makes you think that I possess the patience to teach anyone anything, especially combat?"

She shrugged. "I don't know," she said. "I thought you might make an exception for me?"

Sesshoumaru shook his head. "Most likely not," he replied. "When Rin was first learning her katas, I was banned from the dojo by her instructor."

Whoah, Kagome thought. "Why?"

Pursing his lips he looked off to the side, as if unwilling to meet her eyes. "I

could not help but remark on her form in hopes of correcting her," he said. "She was in tears within ten minutes."

He paused. "I think that might have been the first time she cried since..."

He trailed off.

The atmosphere in the room had suddenly become curiously heavy, full of regrets without repair.

Swallowing hard, Kagome could not think of anything to say to that aborted thought, so she settled for looking as apologetic as possible. "Oh," she said.

His eyes flitted back to her and he gazed at her for a long moment before he appeared to snap out of it. "Suffice to say she did not cry easily. So you see," he said abruptly, cool and bored again, the heaviness of the air dissipating as quickly as it had settled, "it would not be a wise decision for either of us. You will have to find a human instructor." Without further comment he picked up the report on the miko Fuyu and perused it once more, frowning slightly.

"Damn," Kagome muttered. She'd been hoping to circumvent the difficulties inherent in finding someone willing, able, and available to give a crash course to a woman in one-on-one combat, and now she could only hope that Fuyu had a background in weapons or martial arts or she was screwed. Well, more screwed than she was already.

There was silence for a moment as both pondered their respective thoughts concerning the situation, until Kagome cleared her throat. He looked up at the noise.

"Um," she said, "I guess I'm going to bed if we're starting out tomorrow."

"Wise choice," Sesshoumaru told her. He laid the report down on one of the haphazard stacks - presumably so that it could return to the bosom of its family - before striding across the room and to the door. Sliding it open, he stood aside so she could pass through.

Kagome remained rooted in the middle of his study and stared expectantly at him.

"Yes?" he said after a moment, his voice coming out a little more sharply than he had intended.

She rolled her eyes, clearly unable to believe how slow on the uptake he could be. "Could you show me the way?" she asked him. "Your house is... kind of big."

Sesshoumaru blinked.

"And twisty," she added.

It couldn’t hurt, could it? he lied to himself.

Nodding curtly, he swept out, and she followed in his wake. As they walked, he could hear her whispering to herself, trying to remember the way to and from his study to her room - as if it could help her any - and at the edges of her whispers were the furious, hushed murmurs of his servants, spreading the word through his house, speculating, scheming.

When they finally arrived she padded inside without a word and Sesshoumaru watched as she limped across the floor to collapse gratefully in her bedding. After a moment she turned to face him in the dim light.

Wide-eyed and pale, she brought him back to their month of traveling, and suddenly it was as if she had never left him.

"See you in the morning," she murmured before closing her eyes, already sinking into defenseless sleep, and all around them, outside by the walls, tucked away in their quarters, even behind the corners of this very hallway, were youkai waiting to see what he would do, waiting for the chance to correct his folly.

Or perhaps they were waiting for him to correct it himself.

He had not allowed himself to consider them right away when first they plucked at his mind, but now she slept and his servants watched, and Sesshoumaru remembered his grieving thoughts, his exiled thoughts, his dark, ocean thoughts -

If he were strong, he would have killed her himself.

He gazed at her already-sleeping face, so peaceful, so trusting, so ruinous, so treacherous - he could do it now, and she would never know a thing.

He would do it right now, if he were strong.

And in his head, he replayed, over and over, the memory of her in the sunset, tossing her hair over her shoulder; he revisited her in the firelight; he held her gaze as she disappeared down the well, saw her in the light of the moon, broken and mending, her hands in his, remembered the strange, bittersweet circle of her embrace -

Mutely, Sesshoumaru closed the door and walked away.

* * *

It was past midnight when Myouga squeezed through the crack between the frame and the door of Sesshoumaru's study to see Sesshoumaru slumped in a remarkably slovenly posture over his desk and staring with unseeing eyes at nothing in particular. This would not have been unusual except that the expression on his face was almost listless, rather than the normal blank look that he generally sported, which always looked to Myouga like the lord had fallen asleep with his eyes open.

"Troubles, Sesshoumaru-sama?" he asked sympathetically as he bounded over to his master and perched on the desk in front of him.

Slowly Sesshoumaru slid his golden eyes away from whatever dimension he had been studying and focused on the old retainer in front of him.

Then he squished him flat against the desk.

He watched with detached interest as the flea struggled to repair himself. "What was that for, Sesshoumaru-sama?" Myouga finally cried after he had managed to set his head correctly on his shoulders.

Sesshoumaru shrugged, very slightly. "You know very well that there are

troubles. Don't be disingenuous," he ordered. "It will only irk me."

"How do you know that I know?" the flea demanded, still peeved.

"You wouldn't have asked if you hadn't. I expect you to help me solve them, not indulge them. Now," he said, "tell me what the servants are saying."

As usual, Sesshoumaru was right to the point; clearly he did not need a sympathetic ear, though he might after he'd heard what Myouga had to say. The old flea sighed and thought back over the scant half-hour that he had been home.

"The master's got a human whore," were the words that had greeted Myouga when he had arrived.

He was so tired and the announcement was so incongruous with his previously accepted view of the world that Myouga had nearly felt the need to sit down. "What?" he'd said, surprised.

"A concubine... whatever," said Akira, who had met him at the gate. "And she's human."

The old flea was not entirely certain he was in the right frame of mind to receive information like this. He was feeling a bit on edge, having just spent the last ten days snooping about and gathering information in the south for political use, and as it was late and he was tired he was finding it difficult to formulate a proper response. Blinking, he scratched his head for a moment as the captain of the guard shifted from foot to foot, clearly anxious to see what the oldest servant of the family thought about this.

"Well," Myouga said finally, "that was certainly fast. He didn't have one when I left."

The captain snorted. "Is that all you have to say?"

Myouga shrugged, hopping to the captain's shoulder as they both turned toward the servant's quarters from where they stood in the courtyard. "Maybe?" he said. "I'll have to talk with Sesshoumaru-sama about this first before I can say anything else about it."

"Pfft," Akira said, ambling across the grounds a little quicker than necessary. "He insists she's just an ally, so you might not get any information out of him."

"What if she is just an ally?" Myouga asked.

"Oh, he would say something like that," the captain replied.

"Well, he is a trustworthy and honorable man," the Myouga tried. This was true, at least; dogs were fundamentally honest creatures, and found lying quite difficult. Unfortunately Akira did not seem to buy this.

"Then I'm sure things will go south soon enough," he said. "I was told the last one was supposed to be just a pet."

In his heart the flea felt a twinge over this off-hand mention of Rin, whom he had always liked. "And she never did become a concubine," he informed the guard lightly. "Perhaps this one is not either?"

He was answered with only a snort, and together they ducked into the cozy building that housed the staff.

The unrest was immediately evident; throughout the servant's quarters was the low rumble of gossip, little rumors being passed back and forth, each one being planted and nurtured with loving care until it bloomed into something grotesque and unrecognizable from its previous incarnation. Something was certainly going on, concubine or not.

Sighing, he adjusted his position on the captain's armor. As an old man, he was dying to engage in a bit of this no doubt juicy and dangerous gossip, but as the oldest servant of the family he was bound to go to Sesshoumaru-sama and discover the root - though not necessarily the truth - of the situation. Both options would inform him of what, exactly, was going on, but gossip just seemed more fun. Considering the uproar this had caused he doubted the lord would be in any sort of mood to be pleasant.

Myouga shook his head, listening to the whispers. There were many of them, ebbing and flowing through the air, and he heard the word human repeated, over and over. It was a strange thing indeed; he had not thought that

Sesshoumaru would ever take a human lover after what had happened with his father. Then again he would have never thought the daiyoukai would adopt a human child, either, though admittedly that was probably not Sesshoumaru's initial intention regarding the little girl.

He was torn away from his musings when Akira tossed aside the hanging door covering the small common area of the servants' quarters, where quite a number of Sesshoumaru's skeleton staff had gathered, drinking sake and nervously embellishing their stories to each other. The guard passed most of the small groups by before selecting a seat at one of the low tables. There were only two others seated with them, and both of them were subordinates of the captain, passed out from too much alcohol.

"Anyway," Akira said, adjusting his position as he tried to get comfortable, "doesn't matter if she is or isn't. We all know the end." He sighed. "Guess I should start the troops on double drills from now on, eh?"

Yes, Myouga thought wearily.

"Have you seen this - er- concubine?" he wondered out loud, passing a hand over his eyes and trying to rub the sleepiness from them.

"Oh yes," the captain replied. "She pointed an arrow right at me."

Something tickled Myouga's mind, and his hand slowed in its rhythmic massage over his tired brow.

An arrow?

The old flea looked up, blinking. "She did?" he asked. He did not have much practical experience, but to him this did not sound like typical prostitute behavior; usually one had to pay extra to get that sort of treatment. "Why?"

"We wouldn't let her in," the guard said as if this were obvious. He leaned forward and Myouga hopped from his shoulder to the table, watching as the man picked up a bottle of sake and drank from it directly.

This didn't sound right at all. "Why wasn't she with Sesshoumaru-sama?" Myouga wanted to know.

"Don't know. She looked like she'd come a long way."

Frowning, the flea stared at the wood beneath his feet.

"Funny thing though," the captain added after another swig. "She had some holy powers."

Myouga felt the pieces clicking into place, though he felt extremely thick, because, really, Sesshoumaru had only associated with one human in the past fifty years. "She was a priestess?" he demanded, just to make sure.

His companion nodded. "Frankly," Akira confided, wiping his mouth on his sleeve, "I didn't know it was possible to bed a miko and not get your dick purified off, though I can see how the danger would add a bit of fun to it."

Ignoring the man's crude color commentary, Myouga momentarily reflected that he should have known who it was the second someone had said the word 'human,' but coupling it with the word 'whore' had thrown him off. He fought the little wave of relief that swelled inside.

"Kagome-sama," he murmured.

"You know her?" the captain asked, sounding surprised. "I thought she was just a recent acquisition."

The flea whirled on the guard, feeling far more awake than he had in the past few hours. "Fool!" Myouga barked, jumping a little in agitation. "She was the woman who freed Inuyasha-sama from his seal fifty years ago! Didn't Sesshoumaru-sama say anything about that?"

Akira blinked. "What?" he asked dumbly. "I thought that was just a lie!"

"I was there!" Myouga cried, taking deep breaths in an attempt to calm down. "And as far as I know she is not Sesshoumaru-sama's lover."

"Hmmph," the captain had replied, bringing the bottle to his lips again. "Could have fooled me. I've never seen an argument look so much like foreplay before."

Now, standing in front of Sesshoumaru himself, Myouga had to admit that his master and Kagome did tend to bicker like an old married couple, but it was just that - bickering. Unfortunately, he was also certain that the captain of the guard - and most likely everyone else in the house - wanted to see that implication there. Not out of any sort of perverse desire, of course, only that it would make things... neat. Clean. Easy to deal with. It was not at all surprising to him that they would not know how to handle the idea of Kagome as comrade - would probably not even think such a thing possible between a human female and a youkai male as the power distribution would typically be completely uneven - and so they would take whatever clues they could get and stuff her into a convenient role.

Not that it would make a difference what role she was in. Associations with humans were weakness, and the specifics of the relationship were significant only in how deeply they ran.

The deeper they went, the weaker the youkai.

Myouga looked away from Sesshoumaru and at the polished wood beneath his feet. Absently he noted that it was so well-tended he could see his reflection in it.

He cleared his throat. "As far as I can tell they think you and Kagome-sama are... well..."

Sesshoumaru made an annoyed noise. "I know that," he snapped. "I meant have you heard anything... speculative?"

Traitorous, Myouga translated inside his head. It was a small blessing, but he had not heard anything in the whispers of the servants, only eager gossip and some arguing over the girl's precise purpose with their lord. "Not yet," Myouga said, shaking his head.

His master just nodded curtly. That was a relief, though no doubt a short-lived one.

There was a long silence before the flea scuffed a foot against the desk. "If I may ask, my lord...?"

Sesshoumaru didn't even bother to reprimand him for the pointless lead-in to his question. "I am sure you will ask anyway," he replied.

"Er... what is it you are going to do?"

"Do?" the youkai lord said. "I'm going to get her out of here, that's what I'm going to do. What did you expect?"

"You are... going with her?"

Sesshoumaru did not even meet the old man's eyes. "Yes," he said.

"You are leaving the house?"

"Yes. I rather suspect there will be an attack within one to two weeks, but I am certain that the guards will be able to repel it easily. It is not necessary that I remain."

There was a long pause.

"Well! I am certain milord knows what he is doing!" Myouga exclaimed brightly, clearly thinking no such thing. "Now, if you will excuse me, I have a sick cousin in Okinawa that I have to, uh, go take care of. Yes, he's quite ill. And needs, uh, his house painted. No telling how long I'll be gone, you know, so I'll just get going right aw – "

"As you have no doubt surmised I am leaving you in charge while I am gone," Sesshoumaru said abruptly, interrupting the flea's pathetic attempts at dodging his responsibilities.

"What?" the flea cried, trying to sound shocked. "I am not - I mean, I cannot - " he stuttered over his own tongue. "That is to say, I am not qualified!"

"Yes, you are," Sesshoumaru told him lightly. "You are a trusted servant and you are beloved of the staff, especially the guards, so you are the ideal candidate. Besides," he sniffed, "you yourself have said that you are more than capable of the job on several occasions."

"Ah!" Myouga said hastily. "That was before... um, before..." He stumbled, searching for the right words before giving up. "I am certain there must be someone more qualified than I am, who is... um... is..."

"Not a coward?" Sesshoumaru asked.

Myouga bristled, indignant. "I am not a coward!" the flea lied. "I am resourceful."

"Resourceful? That sounds like a valuable quality to me."

Too late, Myouga realized that he had made a tactical error. "I mean! That is to say - arg - !"

Sesshoumaru just smirked, darkly amused. "Excellent," he continued. "Then you agree that you are the best choice for the job. Now sit down. We must talk strategy."

Myouga's shoulders slumped in defeat. Sighing, the flea resigned himself to a long night, and an even longer few weeks ahead of him.

* * *

Kagome awoke to find Myouga attached to her cheek, as if he had never left her without saying goodbye.

She squished him.

As she waited for him to recover she noted with some measure of drowsy despair that it was still dark outside, and she had slept in her clothes.

Bleah, she thought indistinctly. Well, this sort of oversight would certainly change at some point - she had packed a pair of light pajamas for this trip as she was tired of feeling dirty upon waking in the mornings. Her last trip here had taught her the value of a fresh change of clothing; a lesson well learned, especially since the weather was now quite warm.

Warm, she thought indistinctly. Oh yes... it was warm, wasn't it? Strange, but it

seemed to be the same time of year here in the Sengoku Jidai as it did in her time, and, frowning sleepily, Kagome once again wondered just how long she had been away.

There was a movement against the palm of her hand and she looked down in surprise, jerked out of her groggy thoughts by the light pressure against her skin.

"Kagome-sama..." the flea wheezed, struggling to get to his feet after her punishment. "... it is so good ... to see you again..."

He didn't sound very happy to see her, but Kagome decided it was too early to care. "Sorry," she yawned, feeling grouchy. "I was dreaming that someone was sucking my blood, even though the last time I was here he was so inconsiderate as to leave without saying goodbye. Oh, wait."

She watched as he appeared to set one or two arms back into their sockets. "I do apologize Kagome-sama," Myouga said, though he sounded a little resentful, "but Sesshoumaru-sama ordered me home, and am bound to honor his requests as soon as he delivers them."

This was news to her. "You just didn't want him to punish you any more," she said, raising an eyebrow in what she thought might be a passable impression of Sesshoumaru.

Myouga didn't even bother to deny it. "That, too! That, too!" he said, bending his neck this way and that as if to make sure his vertebrae had returned from their excursion into his spleen. "So you see, I had to leave. And now you are back! And I will definitely be there to say goodbye to you when you depart again."

In the depths of her head, a few sluggish synapses fired to life.

Depart, depart... Why does this seem like an important concept? she wondered.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, suddenly jerking fully into consciousness. "That's right, we're leaving today, aren't we?" Not bothering to wait for Myouga to answer she nudged him firmly from her hand to the floor before she quickly

scrambled to her feet and stumbled over to her backpack, wincing and pressing a hand to her stomach as she did so. The feeling of nausea that had plagued her all through the school year was suddenly back full force, a fact that Kagome found exceedingly unfair; even pregnant women only had to vomit for a month straight, she reflected moodily. Withdrawing a brush from her backpack she began to hastily comb her hair into some semblance of order, trying to turn her attention from her stomach to the task at hand. "Myouga! How soon until we go?" she demanded.

"Er," he said as he hopped toward her, sounding surprised at her sudden show of energy. "You and Sesshoumaru-sama are leaving as soon as you are ready, I believe."

Kagome shot him a glance. "You mean, as soon as Sesshoumaru gets tired of waiting for me to get ready, right?"

"Perhaps, perhaps," the flea conceded. "Is that a problem?"

"No," she sighed, scraping stray strands of hair into a high ponytail. "I expect no less." Deftly she tied the style into place and was reaching for her wakazashi when something struck her.

"Wait," she said turning to the flea beside her, "aren't you coming with us?"

Myouga looked almost despairing as he shook his head. "Not as such, no."

"Oh," she replied. Her movements became less hurried as she slid the sword into place beneath her obi. "I'll be going with Sesshoumaru alone?"

She watched as he tilted his head to the side, a strange look on his face. "Is that such a punishment?" he inquired.

Kagome bit her lip in consternation. "Well... no. But he can be so... um, overbearing, sometimes. You know."

She couldn't look Myouga in the eye as, to be honest, that was not the whole reason she felt a certain amount of apprehension over the extremely impending journey. She had not really given much thought to their traveling arrangements, but now that she was thinking of it she found that she, in fact,

wanted to be alone with him, which was probably why it was a good idea to avoid that situation. The idea of having a bit of privacy now seemed darkly illicit and somewhat thrilling in a way that it hadn't been when they had traveled through the mountains together. Kagome licked her lips.

Myouga seemed completely oblivious to the vaguely titillating turn her thoughts were taking and chuckled warmly, effectively pulling her from such thoughts. "Ah, but he is only overbearing because he is used to giving orders and having others follow them, instead of throwing them back in his face as you do."

"Well, I don't mean to," Kagome pointed out. If he didn't give any orders, I wouldn't have to disobey them.

"It's good for him," Myouga told her. "I would not worry about it."

"Yeah, well... what are you going to do while we're gone?" she asked, standing. She hefted her backpack onto her shoulders and wriggled a bit, letting it settle as he replied.

"Ah," Myouga said. "Sesshoumaru-sama has given me control of the house, and I am to look after it while he is away. Which is good, because maybe something will get done around here for once."

Kagome grinned as she shouldered her bow and arrows. "Right, you'll get things done," she teased.

"Have you seen milord's desk?" the flea asked, sounding hurt.

She just smiled at him and held out her hand. "I think I'm ready," she said. "Will you show me to the front of the house?"

"Of course," he said, hopping into her hand and then onto her shoulder. Cautiously Kagome slid her door back and peered into the hallway, looking for youkai. Seeing and sensing none, she stepped out and held her hand to her face as Myouga instructed her to turn right and walk the long stretch of polished wood to the crossway ahead.

Kagome limped in the direction he indicated. "Er, speaking of leaving," she

said, "how long has it been since my last visit?"

"About... a year and a half," he informed her after appearing to think backwards for a moment.

A light flutter of surprise stirred in her stomach. "Only a year and a half?" she asked. "Wow, the intervals just keep getting shorter and shorter. I wonder what that means."

Myouga only shrugged, a gesture Kagome had never failed to find fascinating on those with more than one set of arms. "Why must it mean anything?" he asked with idle curiosity. "Turn left here."

Kagome blinked, following his directions absentmindedly. Come to think of it, why did she think it meant something? Perhaps because it seemed to her that she was always doing something that had been fated or decided before she was even born, so clearly everything must mean something. For instance, what did it mean that she always seemed to run into familiar faces? What did it mean that she seemed inextricably entwined with the lives of Inuyasha and Sesshoumaru? What did it mean that so far the events of her quest seemed to match up with the fairytale she had read? What was the point, and if there was no point... well, that seemed pretty damn pointless.

Shaking her head she returned her attention to her guide. They padded quietly down the deserted hallways, Myouga whispering in her ear which turns to take, though despite his comforting presence the silence of the house made her stomach grind more forcefully against itself. In a way, Kagome supposed, leaving now was a good idea, as Sesshoumaru's home was almost oppressive in its austerity, and she hadn't felt wholly comfortable the entire time she had been there.

She hadn't really realized how anxious the house made her until she finally stepped into the courtyard and breathed an almost-unconscious sigh of relief. The feeling of being watched was still there, but it was far less than it had been within the walls of the house, and, of course, the fact that Sesshoumaru stood at the gate, illuminated in the dim, early morning light, didn't hurt either. He was speaking to an important looking guard, whom Kagome guessed was the captain.

She saw his eye slide, briefly, from the youkai to whom he was speaking toward her.

The moment his gaze locked with hers, Kagome felt her stomach flutter and turn, and the disjointed discomfort that had plagued her when he wasn't near was swept away by fresh new feelings that were simultaneously welcome and unwanted. Determined to ignore this, she lifted a hand and waved.

"Morning!" she called out to him, forcing a cheerfulness into her voice that she did not feel.

Even though every youkai in the courtyard turned to stare at her, the greeting was wasted on him. His eyebrows fell into a frown, and he turned away, very deliberately.

Kagome felt a stab of pain lance through her chest as she let her hand fall, trying to keep the hurt from her face. Fine! I didn't want to talk to you, anyway, she lied to herself with false bravado. Everyone was still staring at her, and she shifted self-consciously, wishing she could suppress the blush rising to her cheeks. As Sesshoumaru resumed talking to the guard, she let her eyes fall to the ground so she wouldn't have to look at his back any longer.

She could still feel eyes on her. It made her jumpy in her own skin.

After a moment Myouga cleared his throat, startling her out of her quiet, painful reverie. Coming to her senses, she forced a smile to her face and held out her hand. He hopped down.

"Kagome-sama," he said, his voice almost comically formal, "I must take my leave from you now. I wish you well on your journey. I am only regretful that I cannot go with you."

Grinning she shook her head. "But Myouga, there will only be danger and adventure where we are going. You should be happy to stay here and sort through the paperwork."

He laughed at this, though, for some reason, Kagome thought it sounded a little forced. "Yes! Yes, of course! How silly of me." She watched as he shifted in her palm before seeming to shake whatever slight discomfort he had felt at

her reminder. "So! I will see you when you return! Good luck, Kagome-sama. I know you will do well."

She felt her own smile go brittle. It was all well and good for him - it wasn't he who was leaving, it was she, hopefully drawing the danger to herself and away from his home. Her stomach twisted again. "Thank you," she told him, suddenly fighting the urge to close her fingers around him and keep him with her. They'd been through so many battles together - sort of - and it would be nice to have him stay...

"See you soon!" the flea chirped, and then, as the little splinter of sadness at this parting twisted in her heart, he hopped down from her hand to the ground and bounded away into the shadows of the house, his form fading until she couldn't see him any longer.

Biting her tongue, she turned back to Sesshoumaru, only to find him two feet away from her and staring off into the distance, a look of boredom on his face.

Kagome almost sighed. Two steps forward, one step back, she thought glumly as she tried to ignore the little stabbing pains in her chest. Not only did his distance hurt, but she was annoyed with herself that she allowed him to hurt her. Worse, she could probably help it, and that made her more annoyed and miserable.

"Are you quite finished?" he said, the sound making her jump.

She scowled at him. "I am," she said, "and good morning to you, too."

He only looked at her for a moment before snorting and turning away. "It grows less pleasant by the moment," he informed her cryptically, beginning to stride away across the courtyard. When he reached the edge didn't even wait for her, but merely stepped over the threshold of the gate and into the world beyond, steps calm and even, though his shoulders seemed strangely stiff. Belatedly, she galvanized her legs into action and jogged after him.

Only ten yards out of the courtyard, she hissed faintly at the stinging soreness in her feet, and she saw, so slight that it might only have been her imagination, a tiny twitch in his fingers.

A noise at her back caused her to cast a look behind her, to the gate, where a group of guards were gathered, and she was struck with a horrible, twisted sense of deja vu.

The tableau behind her was exactly the same as when she had first arrived, guards piled at the gates and peering out, staring at this strange apparition that had stumbled upon them. There was only one difference - there was no fear or anger this time. Instead, she saw, on each face, only a strange, predatory leer.

Stomach twisting, her heart sped up even as her feet stumbled over each other, the skittish, primitive part of her waiting, waiting for the pounce, waiting -

"Keep up."

Sesshoumaru's voice physically jolted her, and she whirled back to him. He was still stiff and silent; he hadn't even turned around.

Quickening her pace, Kagome strove to follow, and wondered, even though she was leaving the safety of his home, why it felt as though she were escaping.

WARNING WARNING WARNING: THIS CHAPTER DEPICTS VERY GRAPHIC SCENES OF DEATH; PLEASE DO NOT READ IF YOU WILL BE OFFENDED (and probably don't eat while you read it, either) WARNING WARNING WARNING

neizgovorljiva nezapisana: I like this chapter, and I hope you guys do, too. It was made to not-suck by technoelfie, who is lovely and wonderful and listens to me whine even though she doesn’t have to. Thank you, dear.

And! This story has broken 1000 reviews on FF net! And! Won something like five awards on A Single Spark, and it's all thanks to you guys. Thank you, thank you, thank you!

Two announcements: In my profile is a link to the LJ community for this fic and others. I post teasers of the next chapter there, so if you want to get

teased, hop on over. The second announcement is that life is catching up with me, so at the most there will be a month until the next update. It's nothing major, just annoying crap that will take up a lot of time, so I'm very sorry. I'll try to update sooner than that! You are all too good to me, by the way – thanks for your patience and your kindnesses. :D

This chapter is dedicated to Touga who is a fabulous artist and who drew one of my favorite scenes from this story, and no Myougas were harmed in the making of it. Man, Touga, not only do you give me pleasurable flashbacks to Utena, you do it with artistic style. Thank you.

PS: I am not kidding about the warning. Seriously.

Tales from the House of the Moon
by
Resmiranda

Chapter Twenty-Eight

"Winners never talk about glorious victories. That's because they're the ones who see what the battlefield looks like afterwards. It's only the losers who have glorious victories."
- Terry Pratchett, Small Gods

* * *

It did not occur to Sesshoumaru until it was far too late that demonstrating his one-armed handstand technique in the middle of a forest trail was not the most dignified of positions for a distinguished and feared being such as himself. In fact it could even be considered downright childish behavior; certainly unbefitting a youkai lord at any rate.

Still, he reflected, at least his hakama stayed where they were supposed to.

He had to admit - not that he cared at all - that she had very nice legs, too, so really this little oversight was not so terrible. No harm in it, really. He quirked an eyebrow and allowed his eyes to follow the graceful curve of her ankle that

sloped gently the further up it went.

Kagome caught his expression. Face red from her prolonged inversion, she struggled to follow his line of sight but gave up when she found herself looking down her own shirt.

"What are you looking at?" she demanded, voice strained.

Your modesty is being compromised, he thought, mentally trying it out.

No, no... something else. I can see your -

Forget that, never mind. You have lovely -

No.

He sighed and settled for clearing his throat meaningfully.

However, before he was able to skirt the issue, a slight breeze picked up. Sesshoumaru saw her eyes widen comically at the unwanted feel of air on her naked legs.

"Aiee!" she shrieked indignantly, and fell over.

He watched, barely containing his amusement, as she scooted backwards off the trail and into the protruding roots of a particularly gnarly tree. She winced at the new lumps digging into her abused flesh as she scrambled to cover her calves. Sesshoumaru repressed the urge to roll his eyes. Why she found the situation so embarrassing was beyond him; the hakama had only fallen to her knees, whereas her strange uniform she used to wear had fallen to mid-thigh, even when she wasn't upside down.

Plucking fingers pulled the thick red fabric over her shins. "I knew it!" Kagome cried, as though in righteous triumph. "I knew it all along!"

The upturned corners of his lips fell back as he tried to figure out what it was, exactly, she had always known. His confusion must have shown in his face, because she actually deigned to enlighten him for once, instead of merrily skipping off and leaving him in the dark as she usually did.

"I knew you were peeping!"

Sesshoumaru scowled. "I do not peep," he said icily. "I cannot help it if you lack the proper maidenly decorum required to retain your modesty."

"Pervert!" she cried, her hands now holding the hem of her hakama firmly to the ground, her legs comically skewed Sesshoumaru felt the beginnings of a sneaking suspicion that she was teasing him. There was no possible way her theatrics could be genuine. Well, two could play that game.

Very slowly, making certain she was watching him, he bared a pointed fang and leered.

Kagome flamed scarlet and turned her face away, sticking her nose up in the air in a manner not unlike a cat pretending a particularly mortifying incident had not just occurred. The comparison interested him.

"I'll have you know," Kagome sniffed, distracting him from his analogy, "that I am a really powerful miko - "

" - woefully untrained - " he cut in.

"Not the point!" she snapped. "Anyway, I am a really powerful - " here she shot him a sideways glare, " - albeit untrained - " she conceded " - miko, and if you put your pervert hands anywhere they aren't wanted, I'll purify your perverted fingers off!"

She really did make it too easy. "How fortunate for me," he said blandly, "as I doubt very much there is anywhere my hands are not wanted."

Kagome gave a strangled squeak and he was left with the distinct impression that her hackles were raised sky-high, putting him even more in mind of a cat. To his surprise he found the notion of Kagome as feline rather intriguing, and as she groped for a response Sesshoumaru absently entertained himself with the thought of her sitting at his feet and worrying the end of his obi.

The vision distracted him on so many levels that he nearly missed what she said next.

Registering her voice he shook away the perilously diverting mental image and refocused on the distinctly-human Kagome, still sitting ten feet away from him in a jumble of roots. She seemed somewhere between apoplectic and mortified, and had turned fully away from him.

Sesshoumaru cast about for something to mollify her. "Forgive me, you were being uninteresting," he said, striving to sound conciliatory.

Kagome cast an unreadable glance back over her shoulder. "I said, whatever, and stop showing off!" she repeated.

Returning to the familiar, comforting state of confusion in which he spent most of his days, Sesshoumaru quirked a brow. "Showing off?" he wanted to know.

He watched as her eyes narrowed in a scathing glance. "Yes," she said primly. "You're still upside down. We all know you can stand on one hand, pardon me for not having youkai strength, you can stop now."

Oh, he thought. "Is that all?" he asked. Not bothering to wait for an answer, he bent his arm slightly before he launched himself into the air, gracefully turning his body upright and landing lightly on his feet.

He absently brushed the dirt from his hand, happily noting that he had avoided accumulating any of it beneath his claws. "Shall we go?" he asked, looking up.

She was holding out a hairbrush to him.

Sesshoumaru looked at it blankly.

He watched as a small smirk bloomed on her face. "You have flower petals in your hair," she informed him. "Though if you want to leave them in, that's fine by me. They look rather fetching."

Kagome couldn't help but repress a giggle at the growl that rumbled in his chest as he snatched the hairbrush from her fingers and turned away from her.

Truth be told, she was rather impressed with the win she had pulled out of that conversation at the last second, though if his hair weren't so long and the forest floor so covered in rotting flowers from the trees above she would have been forced to admit defeat once again. Still, all things considered, it had been amusing and she felt that congratulations were in order. She grinned to herself.

Sesshoumaru pulled her out of her small but satisfying victory party by tossing the brush at her feet. She looked up to see him once again blossom-free, and smiled.

He seemed unamused. "How," Sesshoumaru said, slowly and distinctly, "did I allow you to coax me into such foolish behavior?"

Kagome scowled at him as she stuffed her brush back into her bag. "I didn't coax you into anything. You told me I was standing on my hands wrong and decided to impress me."

The choking noise that curdled in the back of his throat was nearly lost in the sound of the closing zipper. "I am impressive enough; I need not demonstrate that fact."

Kagome hiccupped and coughed over her own incredulous snort, but he ignored her and continued. "I was simply attempting to instill in you the knowledge of proper form."

"Yeah, but I can't do it with one hand."

The youkai ran his claws through his hair, giving the distinct impression that he was preening. Unwillingly, her eyes followed the motion of his fingers. "Your deficiencies are not my problem," he informed her.

Tearing herself away from his hair, Kagome rolled her eyes. "So what? The point is that I didn't make you do anything. You did it all on your own."

For a brief moment she thought he looked slightly panicked, but if he was, he rallied quickly. "Your incessant whining drove me to it," he said hastily. "So you see, it is your fault."

Kagome buried her face in her hands.

Still, she was feeling very pleased with her handling of the situation, as she seemed to have successfully coaxed him out of the silent shell with which he had surrounded himself for the first hour of their journey. Actually, she'd finally figured out that he had been more reticent than usual - if that were possible - whenever they had found themselves in anything less than total privacy, save for those first five minutes after she had arrived. When she had stumbled through the gates of his home he had bantered and teased her, and then, as though he had suddenly come to his senses, he had cut her off, leaving her suspended inside her anxiety without him to distract her; if anything, his sudden cool attitude toward her had made her even more anxious. Then he had loosened up again when they were in his office, but in front of his guards he had been downright frigid.

She didn't blame him, of course; despite the fact that he did not act angry he was most likely a little upset that she had dragged him into her problems. She might even feel that way were she in his shoes.

It seemed, now that she had taken the time to think about it, that it had been very self-centered of her to want to visit him, and foolish to think she would be welcomed. Perhaps, she had speculated miserably, his teasing at the gate and light, weary mockery in the confines of his study had not been playfulness, but cruelty, designed to beat her down, humiliate her enough into leaving.

If that had been the case, Kagome had surmised, then she was clearly too thick to take the hint, and now he was most likely regretting his subtlety. Still, once on the road she had decided that it was going to be an awkward and upsetting trip if he did not stop sulking about their unhappy circumstances, and she had set her mind to work on ways to break free of the sullen silence that had engulfed them.

They were making decent time, and Kagome estimated that they had traveled about three miles before they reached the forest for which they had presumably been aiming. The sun had risen quite prettily over the pristine landscape, but, sadly, she had been in no mood to appreciate it. Instead of skipping frivolously through the flowery fields and generally reveling in the beauty of nature, she'd spent that first hour staring at the back of his head as

they walked down the dirt path toward the southeast.

Worriedly she had groped for something to say - something inoffensive and bland, just to feel out the situation - but uncertainty struck down most of the things she wanted to talk about, as she had no idea whether or not his irritation had eclipsed his bizarre and reclusive mischievous side. The various topics conceived and subsequently rejected included innocuous inquiries as to the status of their progress - 'are we there yet?' - compliments on his home and his servants - 'they suit you' - and light-hearted comments as to his person - 'did you know the sunrise turns your hair pink?' In the end, though, she settled for regression.

"My feet are killing me," she'd announced ten yards into the forest. It seemed like a good topic to use as barometer; his reaction would tell her how he was feeling. If he insulted her, he was probably mildly upset. If he refrained from insulting her and merely teased - though sometimes it seemed as though he had redefined both words to mean the same thing - then he was feeling indifferent, or lightly well-disposed. If he cut her head off, he was pissed.

Kagome had waited for his response.

To her surprise she had seen his shoulders slump very slightly, and belatedly realized that he had still been holding them in a slightly hunched posture, as though tense and anxious. However, this fact turned the gesture into a welcome one; instead of slumping in defeat or exasperation, he seemed to melt into a comfortable stance. She found the reaction strange, as she thought the further they were from the relative safety of his home he would grow even more tense, but before she was able to ponder this great mystery Sesshoumaru had stopped and turned.

He no longer wore that strange, tight expression. Instead he appeared light and bland, just like he had when she arrived, just like he had in his office, just like he had when they had traveled together the last time she was here, and it struck her, bizarrely, that he might not look like this for anyone else but her.

The thought caused her breath to catch in her throat.

She'd stayed silently rooted to the spot as he had looked her up and down, almost as though checking her out, and she'd had to suppress the blush that

arose from his scrutiny. Finally he stopped and let a small, superior smile grace his features.

"How disappointing," he'd said.

The dizzy, breathless feeling left as soon as it had come, and Kagome had scowled. "Don't be so rude," she snapped back, temper flaring. "I bet if you were human you'd be complaining, too!"

The smile increased fractionally. "Indeed, but that is not what I was referring to."

"Oh?" she retorted. "What were you saying, then?"

"I made a bet with myself as to how long it would take you to start whining," he sniffed as he turned back around. "And I hate losing."

Kagome didn't know whether to feel insulted that he had assumed that she would whine - choosing to conveniently ignore the fact that he hadn't been wrong - or to feel triumphant that she had caused him to lose the bet. She supposed that it depended on what the bet had been.

She frowned at his retreating back, staying where she had halted. "What was the bet?" she demanded.

He turned again, faintly surprised, and appeared to think for a moment as if wondering whether or not to tell her the truth.

Kagome raised an eyebrow, crossed her arms, and tapped her foot.

The corners of his mouth twitched, as though he were suppressing a laugh. "I bet that you would begin to whine before the sun was up," he informed her. "So, as the sun has been up for a considerable amount of time, I have lost the bet."

"Oh," she said, slightly placated. "What do you owe yourself?"

Sesshoumaru seemed vaguely perplexed at the question. "I hadn't thought that far," he said. "Perhaps I will merely permit myself an unspecified

indulgence in the unspecified future."

Kagome pursed her lips; Sesshoumaru 'indulging' in something struck her as faintly bizarre. He seemed too severe and reserved to 'indulge' in anything, but, then again, it seemed strange because he obviously did not permit himself to indulge very often. She felt mildly sorry for him before shaking her head and straightening. He was still looking at her, though his eyes seemed to be gazing far away. Kagome refrained from tossing a glance over her shoulder to see what was so fascinating behind her.

"So..." she had ventured instead. He dragged his attention back from whatever cloud he'd been sitting on.

"How about indulging in carrying me? Because we're going to make bad time unless I switch to walking on my hands."

He smirked at that.

"Then walk on your hands," he had replied.

"Fine," she shot back, enjoying the flash of surprise that splashed across his face and was gone. "Hold my backpack."

Which found her where she was now, which was sitting in a feudal forest - once again - in a state of highly enjoyable exasperation - once again - and attempting to surreptitiously massage her bruised behind. Kagome sighed inwardly and wished that she hadn't panicked like a prude little schoolgirl and scrambled away without looking where she was headed; trees just didn't seem to be well disposed towards her.

Well! she thought, she was certainly not well disposed towards them either! What good had trees done for her lately? Stupid trees, always... standing still and providing shade...

"If we are quite finished?" Sesshoumaru said, effectively throwing a cow in front of her train of thought. She looked up, but despite his words he still did not seem as unhappy or tense as he had at the gates of his home. She idly wondered what had changed between now and then. Maybe she really was good for him, like Myouga had told her.

Shoving aside her musings, Kagome stood and shouldered her backpack once more. "Okay, but I wasn't kidding. Unless you carry me we're going to make really bad time."

Sesshoumaru shrugged as she limped toward him. "I am willing to accept a poor time," he said.

Kagome chose to ignore the subtle jab hidden in his answer and she groaned at him in a last ditch attempt to soften his position on the issue. "You never had any qualms about throwing me over your shoulder before," she reminded him.

He was silent.

"And," she added, desperately pulling out her trump card, "that always shut me up. It would be in your best interests." Kagome finally drew up next to him.

He quirked an eyebrow at her, slight smile still playing on his lips. "Is it now?" he asked as he turned and continued walking. "What if I prefer your chatter to your weight?"

"Pfft!" she cried, hobbling alongside him. "Why the hell would you want to listen to me complain?"

He shrugged. "Background noise," he replied.

Kagome smacked him in the arm, and, ignoring the highly irritating smirk on his face on the grounds that it would only encourage him, limped ahead.

* * *

They didn't make it to the shrine that first day. Handstand-demonstration detours aside, Kagome simply could not keep up the pace that was required for a speedy journey, and at nightfall they had been forced to engage in a rather spirited argument about whether or not they should stop. Kagome insisted that they continue - I'm not weak, she had argued - and Sesshoumaru demanded that they halt - you will rest willingly or I will tie you up and force

you to do so, he countered - and eventually only the threat of being wrestled to the ground and trussed like a chicken changed her mind.

Which had probably been a good thing, she reflected now, as she had barely made it through dinner and then had dropped off to sleep the moment she hit her sleeping bag.

"Not weak?" Sesshoumaru had said pointedly when he woke her that morning.

She'd stuck her tongue out at him, which, looking back on it, had set the tone for the day.

Now it was late morning, and Kagome was attempting to persuade Sesshoumaru to entertain her. It wasn't working very well.

"I spy with my little eye..." she said, casting desperately about for something she had not yet espied. Not that it mattered, since Sesshoumaru refused to play, leaving her to talk to herself.

She was nothing if not determined, though.

"...something... yellow. Yes. I spy with my little eye something yellow."

Sesshoumaru said nothing.

"Give up?" she asked him, grinning as impishly as possible at his stoic profile.

Sesshoumaru continued to say nothing.

"Your obi," she informed him. "I'm surprised you didn't get that one; I thought it would be easy."

Sesshoumaru carried on saying nothing.

Kagome was feeling annoyed, which was only marginally better than bored. She wasn't entirely certain this net gain outweighed the price she had to pay, which was no doubt high, at least in terms of the amount of Sesshoumaru's good will she was no doubt rapidly consuming.

"I spy with my little eye something cranky," she announced, angling for an amusing reaction.

"You," he said abruptly.

Well, it's a reaction, she thought. "I am not cranky," she said. "If anyone here is cranky, it's you."

"I am not," Sesshoumaru replied. "You are cranky. I am dignified."

"Why, because you're as interesting as a rock?" she demanded.

The youkai tilted his face towards hers before he looked away. He shrugged, as if to say that rocks could be quite interesting indeed. "No. Because I refuse to engage in pointless games," he informed her.

Kagome scowled. "It wasn't pointless. It was just to pass the time because I was bored."

She saw him purse his lips as he gazed thoughtfully into the distance. "Perhaps you are bored," Sesshoumaru postulated, "because you are boring."

Irritation deepening, she leaned in toward him, attempting to glare the hell out of his face. "Hey, I am not boring," she snapped. "You happen to be the boring one around here."

"How so?"

"I tried to start up a conversation, but no! You wouldn't have any of it."

The slightest frown of confusion crossed what she could see of his face. "Yes I did," he said, sounding puzzled.

"Pfft!" she huffed. "You wouldn't tell me anything you did while I was gone! I don't call that very accommodating. Or interesting."

Sesshoumaru smirked, the slight tilt of his lips deepening the shadow at the corner of his mouth a fraction. "I did not refuse to answer," he said. "I merely said I did nothing." He paused and blinked. "Which is the truth."

He sounded almost rueful, and Kagome found herself half-believing him. "Hmph," she said. "I doubt that, but I forgive you."

"You forgive me?" he said incredulously.

"Yes," she shot back, "and don't make me reconsider!"

"I would not dream of doing anything to rescind your gracious pardon," he said dryly, looking down at her. "Yet the fact remains that, should you wish to have an interesting conversation, you must first introduce an interesting topic, and not just any fool thing that passes through your brain."

Kagome wrinkled her nose at him, and his lips twitched. "I don't know what would engage your interest, Sesshoumaru-sama," she said.

"Perhaps you should ask, Kagome-sama," he replied.

Well. That made sense. "Uh..." Kagome floundered slightly, "what would engage your interest?"

For a long minute she thought he wasn't going to answer her - which, she reflected glumly, would be the same as saying that nothing interested him - but then he frowned suddenly.

"What are you thinking of?" Sesshoumaru enquired. "And please refrain from saying 'something blue.'"

Kagome was momentarily overwhelmed by a vision of Sesshoumaru throwing her into a pit of quicksand. She floundered a little more, trying to trace back the line of her thought to before she had attempted to play a game with him.

"Um..." she said.

He rolled his eyes slightly at her scintillating remarks. She flushed.

"I think I was wondering when this story was going to diverge from the one I read," she blurted, which was true. Ever since the thought had waltzed across her mind yesterday morning it had been returning with increasing frequency,

and now that she was apparently following the story exactly, she was beginning to suspect that she was doing something wrong.

"Oh?" Sesshoumaru said, raising a brow quizzically. He actually seemed interested.

She nodded. "Usually the stories I read only vaguely resemble what actually happens," she said. "But I dunno. Maybe this is different because I'm the main character. They seem to be more accurate about the main story and I've just been a side character until now."

He tilted his head. "Hmm," he replied. "What if it doesn't diverge?"

Kagome shrugged. "Then there won't be any surprises." Except for the one at the end.

"Which," he remarked, "is, in itself, surprising."

She laughed. "I guess so," she said. "But you know, I really, really would have liked for this one to be different. I'm nervous about fighting."

"You have fought before."

That startled her. Kagome squinted up at him, but his face, as usual, revealed nothing of what he was thinking, only that he wasn't thinking much.

"I don't know," she replied. "I've only fought with a bow and arrows before, but that's not good for one-on-one combat. So I'm really uncomfortable thinking about it."

"You think you will become a master of the sword in time to save the village?" Sesshoumaru asked incredulously. For his part, he was beginning to worry about Kagome's plans, especially as she didn't seem to have any.

He watched her shrug. "No," she replied. "I expect to be barely competent in time to save the village."

"How competent is barely competent?" he asked sharply.

"I don't know. Can we stop talking about this?"

He shot her a look, but seemed disinclined to pursue this line of questioning further. Kagome felt a small stab of relief when he turned that tense gaze from her to the road ahead.

Swallowing, she did the same.

An hour later she felt marginally better about the situation, and they were traveling in companionable silence. It was nice not to have to talk about everything, she decided, turning her gaze to the canopy laid out against the sky. She stared up at the green leaves as they passed beneath them, letting the filtered sunlight fall on her face in splashes and briefly shut her eyes.

Inhaling deeply, Kagome felt some of the anxiety in her stomach loosen with the beautiful scent of the summer forest, and she wondered if her companion felt the same thing. Surreptitiously she let her gaze slide to his profile.

She was almost disappointed to see that he continued to look the way he always looked - as if someone turned off the light in the attic, she thought - but then again she had no idea what he was thinking. Perhaps he was enjoying the fresh air and the wilderness as much as she, but just kept his thoughts to himself. On the other hand, Sesshoumaru did not seem to be the sort of person to get mushy about nature - or anything - so he could have very well been thinking about anything. Like... Kagome cast about.

His kingdom, maybe. Or fighting. Blood. Looking pretty. Filing his nails -

"I realize that I am pleasant to look at," Sesshoumaru said, suddenly jolted her back into reality, "so you need not hide the fact that you are doing so."

His golden eyes turned on her. Kagome felt her face flare incandescent. "I was not ogling you!" she snapped. "I was just... wondering what you were thinking!"

He arched a brow. "Then you need only ask," he replied. "And how fortunate that you have, as I was, in fact, wondering what miko training entailed. Perhaps you are inclined to enlighten me."

Kagome blinked. "Um..." she replied. Frantically she thought back to the very short, very tiny lessons Kaede had taught her, the gathering of herbs and which ones were good for what, and how to concentrate her power.

Sesshoumaru was raising his other brow as he waited, no doubt with dwindling patience.

Helplessly she shook her head. "Um," she said again. "Focusing power," she hazarded. "Medicines. Er... ceremonies. And prayers. Maybe meditation...?"

The youkai lord seemed amused. "You do not know," he stated.

Even though she did not, in fact, know the exact details, Kagome nevertheless felt that he was impugning her honor. "Hey!" she said. "I was busy hunting down the shikon shards and looking for Naraku! I didn't have a lot of time to sit around in shrines burning incense!"

He wasn't listening. Instead he had regained that far-away look in his eyes. After a moment he deigned to speak.

"Tell me, Kagome," he said thoughtfully, and for some reason she imagined him stroking a little goatee as he said it, "what do you think you will do when we reach Fuyu's shrine?"

At his side, Kagome frowned, staring up at the sky as she thought. "I don't know," she said at last. "Ask her to train me?"

Sesshoumaru casting a dubious glance in her direction. "Oh, really?" he said. He was obviously falling somewhat short of total faith in her persuasive abilities.

Annoyed at his insinuations she spoke more sharply than she intended. "Yes," she snapped. "I will ask her to train me. What else would I say?"

He shrugged, seemingly unfazed by her short temper. "I do not know the ways of mikos; you are the only one I have met and I gather that you are somewhat... unconventional."

Kagome snorted. "That's one way of putting it," she said. "Incompetent is more

like it, though."

After a minute in which there was no response, she looked up at him, only to see him staring off into the distance with a look of intense concentration - or perhaps mild indigestion - slightly marring his smooth features. She almost drew his attention back to her, but after a moment's wavering decided to stay silent. It was strange, sometimes, that she could read him so well and yet so poorly at the same time.

Either way she supposed that it didn't matter. At least he tended to ask the right questions.

They walked on in silence again. Kagome stared down at the ground that passed beneath her sore feet, composing a little speech in her head that she would say to Fuyu-sama when at last they came face to face, though since most of her entreaties involved a fair amount of foot-kissing, she was not certain how persuasive they were.

Still. Weren't mikos supposed to train other mikos? Wasn't there some kind of unwritten miko social contract? It seemed that there should be, but then again she wasn't really a miko, so it wasn't surprising that she didn't know.

It didn't matter. Once she explained her position to Fuyu-sama, the other miko would have to help her. Mikos were bound to help those in need. Therefore she need not know anything about anything.

Secure in her ignorance, Kagome resolved not to think about it, instead turning her attention to the still-pressing problem of waltzing into a shrine with a demon lord in tow. It probably would not make the best impression, and any mitigating lies she could tell - a pet, a slave, hey, I caught this youkai can I keep him - would insult him and she'd never hear the end of it. Kagome frowned fiercely.

Stealing another glance at his companion, Sesshoumaru noticed that she was deep in thought, moving her lips a little as she apparently tried to puzzle out a particularly vexing problem, and he wondered whether or not to tell her that they were close. He estimated only a few minutes, though the time was growing shorter with each step. He was glad that they were close, as she was still limping and it was becoming harder and harder for him to refrain from

picking her up and carrying her the rest of the way. Truly, he would not have minded; she was soft and light, and it had been quite a long time since he had cupped his hands against those lovely legs of hers -

Sesshoumaru jerked his eyes away, scowling, and tore his mind from her and back to the situation at hand. He lifted his face and sniffed again.

Yes, all was right, but there was... something on the wind, though. He could smell the holy power at the shrine - it wasn't very strong but it was definitely there - but there was something more. There was a smell of sickness and disease, old blood, festering wounds, tattered skin and missing limbs, and under that was the sickly scent of -

Two minutes later they broke through the trees.

Kagome was so engrossed in thought that she jumped when she felt the lightest of touches on her shoulder. Her head snapped up, and her breath caught.

Before them lay the shrine.

It was stately, looming above them and perched on the side of a hill, and no doubt one could see the village it served from the top of its steps. It seemed comfortable, peaceful; the building was edged in on all sides by trees, shady and welcoming. By all appearances it was like any other shrine, except for one thing.

Kagome narrowed her eyes.

There were dozens of men lingering on the hill and on the steps, some clumping into groups, others isolated - there was even a small group at the base of the hill, joking back and forth with each other as they bent and tended a small but flourishing garden - each and every one was bandaged up in some fashion. Each of them had been wounded in some way, and yet the low murmur of voices seemed gentle, a tranquil sort of lull, hospitable and sweet. The stone and grass were both bright and warm beneath the sun, seeming to welcome those seeking shelter and succor within.

This really was not what she had expected. Biting her lip, Kagome surveyed

the almost-pastoral scene in front of her. Where had all these men come from? Surely they had not all come from a single village? If she squinted, she could make out that some of them seemed to be wearing armor.

Soldiers? she wondered.

Oblivious to Kagome's confusion, Sesshoumaru narrowed his eyes slightly at the vista in front of them.

So this was what he had smelled. Or part of it, anyway.

Sesshoumaru found himself reluctant to move forward, as the smell from the shrine - and one, stronger, but further away, where, where - was pungent. It curled in his nose, dark and insidious, like poisoned smoke. Sesshoumaru refrained from placing a sleeve over his face to filter out the scents that plucked at his stomach.

Forcibly he shook himself - he had smelled this before, it was not a problem - and turned his attention to the miko beside him.

He studied her, noticing that while Kagome radiated puzzlement and anxiety her face seemed as determined and strong as it almost always did. She glanced up at him.

"Shall we?" she asked.

He only looked at her, but she appeared to take his silence as the equivalent of a 'yes' - and it probably was - so she just turned away and began to walk forward, across the wide field and towards the foot of the hill. Sesshoumaru followed.

The closer they drew, the more Kagome noticed the fading of the light background noise, of the low hum of camaraderie and good humor. The scraping of armor against the stone steps, the light and easy banter of companions, even the heavy slice of farming tools against the earth - all were falling away as she and the youkai lord walked across the field, and though she was keeping her eyes trained on the top of the shrine steps she could still feel the heavy weight of dozens of wary gazes falling upon her.

They had walked only halfway across the field when a figure appeared at the top of the shrine steps, dressed in red and white.

Kagome blinked. Instead of the young or middle-aged woman Kagome had been expecting, the miko - Fuyu-sama, that's her name, remember, Fuyu-sama, she chastised herself - was much, much older. She was maybe a few years shy of Kaede's age, but where Kaede had been large and matronly this woman was rail thin, sharp where Kaede had been soft. Even at this distance, Kagome could feel the piercing gaze she leveled on them.

In her stomach, she felt something give a little lurch of displeasure at the sensation of being pinned beneath that glare.

Wow, this is just not very encouraging, Kagome thought, and, behind her, she felt a tiny swell in what until now had been a constant level of youki.

Sesshoumaru was reacting, very slightly, to the shrine and its inhabitant. Kagome wondered what that meant.

Haha! Even less encouraging! she thought, slightly hysterical.

As they drew closer, the miko began to descend the shrine steps, and Kagome caught the strong footfalls and the slightly stooped shoulders, caught those gimlet eyes that did not leave her. She felt her hands tighten on the straps of her backpack, a little spark of fear striking in her chest, though she would be damned if she was going to show it. She kept walking, letting time stretch out, until they met at the bottom of the steps.

All around them were the staring eyes of the men, and Kagome caught the slight scent of injury and recovery all around her. She could see each man from the corner of her eye, sizing her up and finding her wanting.

Pay attention! she reminded herself sharply. Forcing herself to focus again on the task ahead of her, Kagome turned back to the figure in front of her.

There wasn't much to look at. The older miko stood stock-still, glaring, the wind picking up her long grey hair and tossing it gently behind her.

She didn't say a word.

Giddily Kagome decided that some polite deference might be in order.

With difficulty due to the weight of her backpack, she bowed deeply at the waist. "Fuyu-sama - " she began.

"What the hell do you want?" the miko said. Her voice sounded like crows' claws scratching over metal.

Startled, Kagome shot out of her bow and took a step back, only to see the miko take another step forward, almost predatory in her deliberate movements. "Spit it out, girl, I've not got all day!" she barked.

Aren't mikos supposed to be kind and good and merciful? Kagome wondered. Or is that not a requirement? Did this one slip through the cracks?

The glowering face in front of her hardened further, the cracks in the skin deepening, stretching tight in a thunderous scowl that only the aged can achieve; it was a look full of displeasure and impatience, of dire duty. It was not a kind face to begin with, and the expression carving itself into it made her look almost ghoulish.

Kagome tried to swallow the nervousness that had appeared in her throat like a lump of some bitter, half-chewed fruit. "I - " she croaked, licked her lips, tried again. "I have come to ask you to accept me as a student."

"Don't need a student," the miko said immediately.

Great. "Um," Kagome faltered. "Um, I just need to learn one thing..."

It was deathly quiet all around them, and Kagome wished she could take a step back and to the side, so she would run against the comforting solidity of the demon lord behind her. She did not dare, though.

Fuyu was still not impressed. "Which is?" she demanded.

Willing her voice to stay smooth and steady, Kagome took a deep breath. "I only need to learn how to seal a god."

The old woman's gaze flickered to Sesshoumaru, and Kagome repressed the impulse to turn around and look at him as well, even though the sight of him - why was he so comforting? - would be enough to ground her again.

"A god," the miko said.

"Er," Kagome replied intelligently. "Yes. There is a sorceress in Edo - east of here - and she is, um, making all of Edo sick, but she's doing it with the help of - "

"Silence, girl."

Kagome silenced, her mouth snapping shut so sharply she almost sheared off the end of her tongue. The miko was still looking over Kagome's shoulder, and it did not look like the thoughts in her mind were at all pleasant.

Kagome counted to three to give herself time to calm her breathing and the nervous palpitations of her heart.

When she was finished Fuyu was still studying Sesshoumaru with a beady eagle eye, and Kagome wondered if he found the old woman as intimidating as she did. Probably not, she decided glumly. The stirring of youki and holy power around them had not died down, and it was probably only a matter of time before one or the other sought dominance, and neither of them seemed to be the sort to back down for the simple reason of keeping the peace.

Finally the old woman opened her mouth.

"Very well," she said. "Let's discuss this further inside the shrine."

Then she narrowed her eyes, still staring straight at the youkai lord.

"But no filth allowed."

Kagome gasped and felt a flare of fury in her chest. The sudden rush seemed to correspond with a spike in the demon lord's youki, but she didn't really notice it. Scowling ferociously, Kagome stepped in front of him, blocking him from the old miko, her hand going automatically to the hilt of the wakazashi at her hip.

"Hey!" she almost shouted at the woman, her face going hot and cold with anger. "Don't be so damn rude!"

Fuyu's eyes widened, and the youki and holy power in the air both flickered as though guttering in the wind before each settled down.

No one said anything for what seemed like a long minute, but Kagome was so indignant that it didn't register with her. She was working up a good, fuming tongue-lashing about the value of good manners and courtesy, and how she didn't care that Fuyu-sama was a miko and an elder, didn't her mother teach her anything?

Except then she heard Sesshoumaru laugh his short, sharp laugh, his audible smirk, and she looked over her shoulder at him.

He was smiling without humor. She saw his eyes close briefly.

"I will make camp," he announced to her, as if they were alone. "You will join me at the end of the day."

Then he turned and began to walk, back across the field to the forest, his beautiful silver hair tossing gently in the wind. Kagome didn't even try to suppress the strange pang she felt at the sight of him strolling so nonchalantly away from her.

"Come," snapped the cracked voice of the miko, jerking Kagome out of her strange, sad trance.

She whirled back around to see the older woman already scaling the steps of the shrine. Dimly, Kagome registered a restless stirring around her coupled with the low grumble of discontented voices, and the eyes that had been so wary before were now feeling sharper and more malevolent. Not daring to look around, she hastened to follow and tried to ignore the empty space behind her that should have been filled.

The shrine was like any other. It looked serene and peaceful, nestled against the hillside, and Kagome wondered how anyone who lived in such a beautiful place could be so sour. Perhaps Fuyu-sama had only been there a few weeks?

Was new to the job? Ate brimstone for breakfast? The possibilities were endless, but Kagome thought that if she could live here - sans grouchy priestesses - she would be quite calm and peaceful about the whole thing, instead of so bitter and turbulent as her almost-mentor seemed to be.

Once inside Fuyu-sama didn't even offer her any tea or food, despite the fact that it was obvious Kagome had come a long way and was clearly tired and sore. Instead she gestured sharply to the floor, indicating that Kagome sit.

Kagome sat.

Fuyu-sama lowered herself across from her, moving a little stiffly but still quite agilely for someone of her apparent age. When she was settled, she stared at Kagome down her strange, sharp nose, and said nothing.

After a moment she said even more nothing. For someone who had such an impressive voice at her command, Kagome thought, Fuyu seemed to say nothing even more effectively. She had a truly remarkable silence.

Casting her eyes down, Kagome suppressed the urge to fidget.

"Why do you travel with a youkai?" Fuyu said abruptly, causing Kagome's heart to choke before she quickly recovered, looking up again.

"He's a - " Not friend! her brain screamed. Remember what he suggested? " - an ally. He's an ally."

Fuyu seemed unimpressed by this news. "Why does a little girl like you have a youkai as an - " here the miko seemed to be rolling the idea around in her mouth, finding it distasteful, " - ally?"

The other woman's attitude was beginning to grate on her. She thought about saying none of your business! but decided that such a reaction would probably not be conducive to her goals, which, in the last five minutes, had reordered and rewritten themselves to learning how to seal, learning how to fight, and getting the hell out of here.

"He and I fought together once," she said. "And I performed a service for him as well."

Fuyu's eyes narrowed. "Who did you fight against?" she demanded.

You're not going to believe me, Kagome thought. "Naraku."

"Hm."

Kagome didn't like the sound of that 'hm.' She had expected it to sound disbelieving, but instead it sounded bored, even though Fuyu was clearly old enough to remember the stories of the fearsome hanyou that must have trickled down through the country. The fight had torn up a good stretch of land through three different villages, after all; it was probably not until the Tokugawa period when the story had disappeared or morphed into something unrecognizable, cannibalized for parts, gutted for thematic elements.

Still, Fuyu did not appear well-disposed towards following this line of questioning. "What service did you perform?" the woman demanded, one eyebrow drawing down while the other rose, like two bushy grey caterpillars on a see-saw.

This time she didn't hesitate.

"That is a private matter, between him and me," Kagome told her.

Kagome knew what her evasion sounded like - it would have been the same even had he been human - but it was, in the end, something she could not discuss. He wouldn't want anyone to know his suffering, nor her hand in his vengeance.

It was their secret, the foundation of the thing that was them, the tiny grain of sand inside the pearly layers of their bond. She had never told anyone - except Amaya, who had been there - about the things of which she and Sesshoumaru had spoken nearly twelve years ago in the light of the fire. It didn't seem right to reveal to anyone the depth of his mourning and grief; he would not have even shared it with her had he not been so desperately debilitated, so crippled by the weight of Rin's loss, and she respected that.

As for her, she, too, didn't want to share this mystery with anyone. It was an almost selfish impulse, but it was for them, for him and her, alone. If she had

nothing else of him, if she were to disappear into the future, if he were to leave her behind, she had this.

The old miko was still looking at her, the bright suspicion shining in her eyes. "I see," Fuyu said.

No, you don't, Kagome thought. No one does. Except us.

"Why is he here now?" Fuyu asked.

"There are dangers right now, connected to both of us," Kagome answered carefully. "He is... protecting me, until I go back to Edo."

"Because of this... service... you performed."

"Yes."

There might have been something to the set of her face, but Fuyu seemed to relent - not quite satisfied, but satisfied enough to leave this line of questioning alone for now - and sat back slightly.

"So," she said lightly. Kagome was not fooled by the sound of her voice. "You wish to save Edo from a sorceress, and she gets her power from a god."

That was pretty much the gist of it, Kagome decided. "Yes."

The miko was looking her up and down. "You are untrained." It was a statement, not a question.

"Yes," Kagome said, voice stiff.

"Woefully untrained."

Kagome chose not to say anything to that. She could tell Fuyu was baiting her; enough time arguing with Sesshoumaru had taught her to recognize that particular tactic.

"A miko," Fuyu repeated, "woefully untrained, small, weak, and lacking in proper conduct as evidenced by the company she keeps, who wants to learn

how to seal a god."

"And fight."

"Ha!" Fuyu snorted. "I don't know anything about fighting. You'll have to find someone else to teach you that. But that's not my concern. A useless miko who wants to learn something from me."

Valiantly Kagome bit her tongue hard enough to draw blood.

"For nothing."

She swallowed hard. "Not for nothing!" she protested. "I know a little about herbs and I'm good at healing. I can clean, and cook - "

Fuyu cut her off with a weird outburst of barking laughter. "What do I need with a cook or a maid?" she demanded. "The soldiers take care of themselves, and I take care of myself."

Dismayed, Kagome leaned forward a little. "But I do know things about medicine!" she said urgently. "Obviously you care for those who need medical attention. Don't you need... you know, help with that at all? Assistance?"

She trailed off. The old woman was stroking her bony chin thoughtfully, as though she had just seen a particularly unpleasant chore become someone else's particularly unpleasant chore.

"There could be something," Fuyu replied after a contemplative moment. "There's always something you could do, I suppose."

This did not sound promising. Kagome was about to open her mouth to ask what this something could be, when a vision flashed across her mind and -

- grey skin and glass eyes and flies and maggots and rotting meat and bowels and death and death and death and -

- she reigned herself in.

"Anything," she answered instead, almost desperately. "I'll do anything you

want me to do."

The old woman snorted. "You don't even want to know what it is I'll ask."

"Er," Kagome stumbled. "I do, but it wouldn't make any difference."

Shifting on her knees, Fuyu looked at her speculatively. "You have a daiyoukai at your disposal, yet you are going to undertake this task yourself?"

"Yes," Kagome answered immediately, fervent and sincere. "This is my responsibility, not his."

Shaking her head, Fuyu began to chuckle, her harsh frame rattling against itself. "You are a fool," she said. "A complete fool."

Her words stung more than they should have, but Kagome couldn't risk offending her. Humiliated and frustrated, she said nothing.

After a moment the chuckles subsided and the woman's bones ceased to jerk and poke against her skin. "Very well," she said, still sounding maliciously amused. "I will teach you how to seal a supernatural being, which includes both gods and youkai, and in return you will - " here she chuckled again, which Kagome did not find at all encouraging, " - assist me in my medicinal duties. I think I shall require four weeks of service from you."

Kagome felt her face melt a little in vague, helpless despair. Would there even be any of Edo left after four weeks?

Fuyu went on, seemingly amused at Kagome's distress. "It would be only two weeks, but you also said you wanted to learn how to fight," she continued, "so I will only require your assistance for the first half of each day. Since you want to learn how to fight, I suggest you find someone to teach you during the afternoons and evenings. We'll start before dawn."

At the last second Kagome realized that this was essentially a favor, and she refrained from groaning, as she could almost hear her mother's admonishing tone concerning gratitude and things of that nature. "When before dawn?" she asked instead, succeeding in keeping a majority of the despair from her voice.

Fuyu grinned almost sadistically at her newly acquired slave labor, which made her face split like the chop of a hatchet against an eldritch tree, revealing two rows of hard yellow teeth. "An hour. Early. There's lots to be done in the mornings."

Kagome could only imagine. "All right," she said finally, wondering what the hell she had just blissfully jumped into. Maybe she should have asked what would be expected of her.

Except she couldn't, because she needed a mentor, and this was the nearest that seemed to be of any use, and she needed to do this quickly. It didn't matter that some other miko might have taught it to her for nothing, since she still needed to find someone to teach her how to fight. It would have probably taken her a month to train either way, and the sooner she started, the better. There was no time to waver about this.

There was no time at all. She should have had all the time in the world, but now she had none. No time, and no choices.

Kagome placed her hands on the floor and bowed low. "Thank you, Fuyu-sama. I am humbly grateful to you for your help."

"Quite groveling," Fuyu snapped. "I have a task that needs doing, so you might as well get started." Kagome heard the scraping of a body against the floor and jerked her head up to see the old woman rising to her feet. Nervously Kagome popped up also, brushing the hair from her face.

"Tie your hair back," the older miko barked. "And leave that monstrosity here."

Disconcerted, Kagome dropped her backpack to the ground before fishing out a ribbon and hastily tying her hair into a high ponytail. Fuyu glared at her.

"Forgive me!" she gasped, her fingers working furiously. She barely had time to let her hands fall before Fuyu was already out the door and into the courtyard. Kagome hurried after her.

They descended the steps, Fuyu stomping on ahead while Kagome limped down, her feet still sore and fiery from her journeying. She winced at the pain

and repressed the childish urge to make a face at the back of Fuyu's head. The old miko probably had eyes back there, keeping watch for signs of insolence, and the punishment probably wouldn't be anything as benign as writing out, 'I will not blow raspberries at my teacher' five hundred times.

Fuyu reached the bottom before Kagome did, and Kagome's progress was made even harder by the fact that any stray, bandaged soldier sprawled in their path would lift his feet away for Fuyu but place them back for Kagome. Miserably, she picked her way down the steps.

When her feet hit earth again Kagome hobbled after her new mentor, who was striding towards a small wooden hut Kagome had not noticed before. Before she had a chance to arrive, Fuyu had already gone in and come out twice, depositing two carts in front of the door. One of them contained a couple of shovels.

"Gardening?" Kagome asked when she arrived. She could do gardening.

"In a manner of speaking," Fuyu said, hefting the handles of one cart in her hands. Then she lifted a hand over her head, signaling something to the men sprawled on the steps, who then rose and began to move down. Fuyu didn't wait for them, and, grabbing a cart, Kagome followed suit and trotted after her toward the fields.

However instead of stopping they went on, past the little harvest plots the men were tending and out beyond the grounds of the shrine, banking sharply to their right and around the hill. The soldiers followed behind like a strange wake in the grass.

Fuyu was clipping along at a swift pace, and Kagome strove to keep up.

It was hot. She could feel the perspiration rolling down her back and beading on her upper lip, and the sweat of her feet caused the blisters to sting even more than usual. After fifteen minutes of this quick striding, Kagome resigned herself to pain and began to count her steps, one-two, one-two, making up her own pathetic cadences, trying to focus on something other than the sharp, knife-like pains.

Twenty minutes into their walk and Kagome was beginning to register

something strange at the edge of her senses, but she couldn't quite put her finger on what it was that plucked at her, trying to capture her attention. She frowned.

"Your youkai is following us," Fuyu remarked nonchalantly, distracting her from her puzzled thoughts.

Kagome hadn't noticed, though once the older woman had mentioned it she immediately pinpointed Sesshoumaru's presence, high above them, tracing their steps. "Yes," she replied. "He's, um, keeping watch."

Fuyu trained her eye upwards on the distant white smudge against the hard blue sky. "What kind of demon is he?" she asked speculatively.

Kagome followed her eyes. "He's a dog demon," she informed her.

"Ah," Fuyu replied. "That would be why he is so far up."

Kagome suspected that she was still too tired to keep up with current events as well as she should have. "What?" she asked, confused.

The old miko shook her head, her slate-grey hair swaying lightly with her movements. "You will see soon enough. Try taking a big breath, girl."

"I have been," Kagome said, almost - but not quite - resentfully.

"Through your nose, fool."

Is she always this unpleasant? Maybe this is only the hazing process, Kagome thought miserably, though she suspected it probably wasn't. She couldn't remember the last time she had encountered such an unpleasant individual, and she had encountered a lot of them. Well, maybe those two men who couldn't keep their hands to themselves... and the madoushi...

Okay, so there were plenty. That still didn't excuse Fuyu's rudeness. Kagome scowled at the woman's back before inhaling deeply.

There was a slight scent -

- the wind shifted -

- oh, there it was.

Kagome gagged.

It was rank, and rotten. Like bad meat and compost, sewage and trash heaps. It was the sort of smell that reached down through one's neck, grabbed the stomach, and pulled.

Kagome coughed and heaved, just a little, at the same time, the resulting choking noise grating over her throat and leaving it lightly sore.

"Oh, god," she exclaimed. She tried to push the cart with one hand so she could use the other to cover her nose, but it wobbled and wavered, and she had to catch it before it toppled. Letting her mouth drop open slightly, she settled for shallow breaths, trying to avoid the nose, but she could taste it, too.

"Oh, god."

"You'd better get used to it," the miko said. "There's lots more of that where we're going."

Oh, GOD. "Where are we going?" Kagome demanded, her voice bordering on shrill. Mentally she kicked herself, trying to get a grip.

She recognized this smell, but it had never been so... potent before. She had never been the one who had to deal with it. That had been Inuyasha and Miroku, because they were tough and inured to it, but if the carts and the shovels were anything by which to judge then she was going to grow up and get tough really quickly, right now.

Fuyu hadn't lied. If there was one thing Kagome was sure that Fuyu didn't do, it was lie. She might have been a cold, crotchety bitch, but she wasn't a liar. She had said there was lots more of the smell where they were going, so there was lots more of the smell where they were going. Even where they weren't going, because it traveled on the wind, blissfully caressing their faces with decay.

She'd smelled it at the shrine, too. Kagome realized that, now, so that she didn't need Fuyu saying, "we usually don't do this, but it's too close for just a prayer," to know that this was not a regular occurrence; it was just too close, that was all. There were too many men at the shrine, injured and repairing, newly minted into cripples and malformed figures, for her to have been so naive as to not realize where they must have come from.

There was a lot more stench where that came from, because it came from a battlefield, ripe beneath three days of midday summer sun.

The closest Kagome could ever remember being to so many dead human bodies was Sango's poor ghost village, and even then they had found it before everyone became less and less human and more and more organic human components.

Like protein. Gas. Slippery organs. Iron - there was a lot of iron in the blood, after all - and contaminated water. Whatever had been the last meal. Whatever had been two meals before that.

They had been half a mile away when Kagome had taken her first good whiff and wished that she hadn't, and the closer they came the more she twitched with repressed heaves.

So when they reached the edge of the battlefield, Kagome tried to choose between fainting and vomiting before desperately balancing on the equilibrium between the two, in half-sick half-gone territory. It was a fine, fine line.

"Better get to work!" Fuyu announced, morbidly cheerful, and Kagome dizzily watched her tramp off through the horse dung and horse parts, through the lumps that had once been human beings but were now just dead things melting in the shells of their armor. The silent sweep of men behind her murmured with something like industrious camaraderie and fanned out into the battlefield as well, stepping carefully around the things that had once been their friends. They wasted no time in bending and picking up a body here and there and beginning the trudge to burial.

She watched as Fuyu heaved a body onto her cart, and then another, and then another before wheeling it away to a line of shallow graves, off the battlefield

and already filled, before she dumped them off. There were several men already digging, and next to them a pile of salvageable armor and weapons was building up steadily.

Kagome was rooted to the spot, her eyes taking in the wide, wide field of bodies, of stinking, decaying bodies that she had to help bury.

She thought she might lie down and die right with them.

From the corner of her eye, she saw Fuyu glance up at her frozen assistant and scowl. "Hurry up, you useless girl!" the miko half-yelled, half-snarled, and somehow Kagome's legs jerked into action.

She stumbled onto the battlefield, unable to breathe, unable to think. She remembered from some science class - a useless, annoying, disgusting fact that her brain decided she needed to recall - that scent came from tiny molecules of the thing that smelled escaping into the air.

She smelled corpses. Her nose was full of corpses. Her lungs were full of corpses. The entire world, stretching as far as she could see on all sides, was full of corpses. She could only be ghoulishly grateful that there were too many to burn; the stench would be even worse.

Fuyu was yelling something at her, the men were tossing low gallows-humor murmurs back and forth, but Kagome couldn't hear over the screaming in her own skull, the horrible knowledge that this was where everyone ended.

Had she been too young the first time she had lived in the Sengoku Jidai to realize it? Too sweet and naive? Too distant and good and pure and pretty and oh-so-fucking-innocent?

She must have been. She must have been.

She couldn't remember...

She came to a body. Her first.

Mentally sobbing, Kagome bent and put her hands gingerly against the former human being's armor, trying not to touch his - no, its, its - clothing or skin, but

ultimately had to tangle her hands in its kimono. It was so heavy, too heavy, heavier than her, but with the help of a knee she got it onto the cart, already sweating, panting, breathing -

She couldn't take this, and yet she was. This wasn't so bad, except it was, but she was okay. She hauled another body into the cart, and then a third.

She'd done it. Triumphantly, she grabbed the handles and began to carefully maneuver the cart around the dead bod -

- no, around them, around them -

- around the obstacles on the ground, toward the already impressive graveyard, unmarked, unmourned.

She was concentrating only on that goal, and so when she slipped in horse shit she almost didn't register that she was falling.

It only took a moment to fall, but it seemed like forever, and she was flinging her hand out, toward the ground, instinctively trying to catch herself. And it would have been fine, if it hadn't been for him.

For it. If it hadn't been for it.

It was right there, lips pecked away by birds, maggots crawling in the wound that killed it, eyeless, and, worst of all, armor-less.

Her hand was falling toward what had been its stomach.

No, his stomach. His stomach.

Then her hand hit his skin and went through -

She probably screamed, but afterwards she couldn't remember.

Her escape was a stinking blur, and then she was at the edge, puking up her meager sustenance into the grass, clogging her nose with more rancid stench, except this stench was hers though that fact did not make it better. As she rejected the contents of her stomach, she frantically wiped her hand against

the hot sun-baked grass, edged away from it. Tried not to vomit any more and did it anyway.

She felt Sesshoumaru - radiating something, something fierce and angry, hard and helpless - come down from the sky and land twenty feet away, but he did not come any closer.

Go away, Kagome thought, miserably. Go away.

She heard the squelch and crunch of blood and grass as Fuyu strolled up behind her.

Go away, Kagome thought, furiously. Go away.

She'd vomited everything now, was only spitting acid. Her body felt as though it were trying to eject her windpipe, her tongue.

"Should have asked what I wanted you to do, shouldn't you?" Fuyu said, and through the retching and the pounding blood and the dripping bile-laced snot, Kagome could hear the bitter years of burying in the miko's voice, the dark years of sealing death inside the earth, the nights of nursing sickness to health, or through to the end - all the real things a miko did - and discovered why Fuyu was so curdled and sour.

What an ugly, ugly world. What an ugly, ugly fate.

Why had she ever thought being a miko would be a good thing?

No wonder Kikyou wanted to escape. There had been the jewel and the fight, but there was also this.

Kaede had been so old. She must have been so, so strong.

Kagome's stomach heaved harder, and she was glad Sesshoumaru was standing away, away from her, because she didn't want to get anything on his perfect white clothes, didn't want him to see too closely the human things of which she was made, exactly like all those dead men rotting beneath the sun.

She spat.

Fuyu sighed.

"Well," the old miko said. "You agreed to this. This was the price."

She sounded almost mild, almost abstract. Nonchalant. The calm center of endings.

Kagome heaved again, even though each gulping breath only drew more rotten, fetid stench into her lungs, choking her on the little bits of human disintegrating into the air. Her eyes streamed.

"Of course, you could go and fight without knowing the things you need to learn," Fuyu murmured quietly, behind her, serene, like the whistling boatman on the river Styx, "but then you would die."

Like this, Kagome knew, and behind her eyelids, in the darkness of her head, she could see their dripping faces, their vacant eyes. Like this.

"So," Fuyu said, "you'd better get up - "

- like this, like this -

" - if you want to survive."

And that was that.

At least there's pretty lights: Yeah. This is... long. Chapter 30 is longer, but won't be published til I finishe chapter 31. Trying to stay on schedule. Much love for you all.

As always, love to Technoelfie for giving this chapter a looksee and giving me just the right suggestions to make it good.

This chapter is dedicated to the fabulous Andrea of Merimask Designs, who sent me (eeeeee!) a mask of Sesshoumaru in doggy form, and it is

THECOOLESTEVER. There's a picture of it in my LJ, so... eeeeeeee! It's just cool, and you have rocked my world muchly, darling!

Tales from the House of the Moon
by
Resmiranda

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Especially at night, I worry over situations that
I know will be all right; perhaps it's just my imagination
Day after day reappears
Night after night, my heartbeat shows the fear
Ghosts appear
and fade away...
- Colin Hayes, "Overkill"

* * *

"I'm dying," Kagome moaned into the slippery material of her sleeping bag. She was curled in a fetal position, face pressed to the ground as she gripped her still-turning stomach, and was apparently laboring under the delusion that she was the most unfortunate creature to walk the planet despite ample evidence to the contrary. Had she not spent all afternoon burying creatures more unfortunate than she?

Sesshoumaru sighed. "You are not dying," he said automatically for what seemed to be the twentieth time. "You are merely ill."

"I'm dying," she insisted miserably, lifting her head to glare reproachfully at him as though he were the cause of her current misery. Her skin looked remarkably pale and sickly in the firelight even though she had washed up only twenty minutes ago.

"Perhaps," he said pointedly, "you should change into something warmer."

He watched as her face twisted a little with annoyance. "I already told you, this

is not indecent. Don't think you can trick me into changing back into those stifling clothes."

Sesshoumaru looked away, slightly guiltily. "That is not what I meant."

"Whatever," Kagome muttered, letting her forehead touch the ground again. Since the moment she had stumbled back through the trees from her bath the youkai lord had been hinting rather strongly that she was dressed improperly, though she noted with some satisfaction that he had first done a rather satisfying - though subtle - double take at her clothes before choosing to reprimand her for them. True, the tank-top and pajama pants were scantier than her haori and hakama, but at the moment she didn't really care; the traditional clothes were hot and stifling, and her stomach couldn't take much more abuse. In the thin cotton, the fire warmed her skin and relaxed her muscles well enough without forcing her to be bound about the waist. Sesshoumaru could just deal with it. After all, he himself had seen her in her school uniform, and she considered that to be more revealing.

Not that it mattered. She was going to die anyway. Maybe she'd at least make a reasonably attractive corpse.

"I'm dying," she said again, withdrawing a hand from where it was pressed to her abdomen only long enough to pass it across her forehead and wipe away the thin sheen of cold sweat that had gathered there.

"You are not dying," he replied, sounding tired.

"How do you know?" she demanded, not feeling at all well-disposed towards his world-weary know-it-all attitude.

"You do not smell as though you are dying."

That brought her up short. Oh yeah, she thought. That whole dog-thing.

Blood rushed to her cheeks at the thought that he could smell the state of her health; it smelled bad enough to her that she could only imagine how it affected him. "I didn't give you permission to smell me!" she snapped, not caring that she was being unreasonable. The sudden flare of indignation caused the muscles slung low across her abdomen to tense, and she winced,

doubling over again. "Oh god," she muttered. "I feel horrible. Awful. Disgusting, miserable, bad, crappy, uncomfortable, terrible, in agony - "

Sesshoumaru made a sound in his throat that sounded suspiciously like a growl. "I lied," he said abruptly. "You are dying."

"I knew it! I am dying!"

"Sorry, my mistake," Sesshoumaru replied. "You are not dying." Then he added, almost to himself, "Though you are very close to it."

He sounded unhappy. Kagome decided that she had wrung the last bits of entertainment from this particular charade and shut her mouth before slowly drawing herself into a sitting position. Moodily she stared at the fire and reflected that things were not going as planned. At all.

Still, to Kagome's grateful surprise - or rather, she would have been grateful if she had not been so sick, and she would have been surprised if she'd had the energy - they finished the burial just as the last orange rays of the sun disappeared beneath the horizon, saving her the burden of looking forward to more of the same tomorrow. What had seemed like an impossible number of corpses had merely been a difficult number of corpses, and more than half of them had been buried already, presumably by Fuyu herself and her league of helpers the day before.

Small favors, Kagome thought, annoyed.

After her rather rude wake-up call, she'd spent over an hour in the stream that fed both the shrine and the village several miles to the east of them. It ran close to the campsite Sesshoumaru had picked out, convenient for water and bathing, and happily upstream of any major settlements so it was mercifully clean.

At some point during her bath Kagome had stopped trying to throw up and had started weeping, even though she didn't feel particularly sad or upset. She suspected it was merely a defense mechanism designed to relieve the stress of the day, though the fact that it clogged her nose and caused the skin around her bloodshot eyes to flush and puff up seemed pretty stressful in and of itself. Quietly Kagome had cursed whoever had designed the human body so poorly

as she dunked herself in and out of the cool water, trying to wash away the red ugliness of her face.

When she returned to the campsite her mood had been further soured by the fact that Sesshoumaru talked her out of burning her outfit. She had wanted to put the clothing to the flame, as she was certain she would never get the corpse smell out if it and she had extras anyway, and besides, it would have been remarkably therapeutic to do so. He had not agreed.

She hadn't even seen him move. One second she was holding her arms out, ready to toss the fabric into the fire, and the next her wrists were caught in his hands and he was staring down at her with something like amusement. He hadn't even said anything.

She'd squirmed for a moment, feeling strangely fluttery under his gaze before she had capitulated. "Oh, all right," she'd scowled at him, disappointed at how easily she had caved to what he wanted. He let her go, turned around, and walked back to his tree where he settled down into his former posture. Her subsequent, obscenity-laden expedition back to the stream to do her laundry seemed to have only left a faint, amused smirk on his face.

So he didn't so much talk her out of it as startle her out of it, but that wasn't the point. The point was she hadn't burned her clothes, and she wasn't entirely certain she would ever be able to forgive him for forcing her to be sensible.

Now, clean and fresh and still nauseous beyond belief, Kagome propped her head on her hand and decided that she didn't want to be sensible. She wanted to throw a fit, have a nervous breakdown, and spend the rest of her life under a tree attempting to peel bits of sunlight off the ground and eat them. It would be like a vacation! And after today, didn't she deserve a vacation? Though now that she came to think of it, did heroes - or heroines, as the case might be - get vacations? Had Inuyasha?

Deep down inside, Kagome was aware that she was only attempting to distract herself from thinking of what she had done today, but she didn't care.

So... vacations. Worriedly, Kagome frowned. Now that she was thinking of it, the only time she had ever really seen Inuyasha at rest was when he was in

her home in the modern era. Or staked to Goshinboku, which seemed infinitely worse - would she have to seal herself away just to get some peace?

How depressing, Kagome thought glumly. As if I weren't depressed enough.

Sighing, she poked moodily at the fire.

From his comfortable position under his chosen tree, Sesshoumaru watched Kagome from beneath half-closed eyelids, studying her profile in the firelight; she was not facing his direction, so he took this opportunity to study her at his leisure. Slowly his gaze wandered over her, taking in her still-damp hair - gilded gold and glossy in the light of the flickering flames - then wandering lower to absorb the warmth of the skin of her face, and then to the soft, elegant curve of her throat as it swept downwards to the gentle swell of her breasts, covered in that strange, clinging fabric, and he couldn't help but wonder what it felt like, if the cloth was as soft as the body beneath it -

Sesshoumaru tore his eyes away and jerked his gaze to the leaves above, mouth curiously dry.

Ridiculous, he thought to himself. These stray thoughts seemed to be getting more and more insistent and he was becoming increasingly anxious about them. It was obvious that the pressure was beginning to affect him if he was letting himself find any sort of pleasure or comfort in her; he simply couldn't allow that. He couldn't allow himself to slip so badly, just like everyone expected him to do, couldn't allow himself to be so foolish as to strip away his own defenses again.

Clearly he had to think of something else. Something that wasn't Kagome ten feet away from him, barely covered by her soft, flimsy clothes, because he wasn't having this. He had more important things to think about. Like his home.

Oh, yes.

Home.

The word splashed over his heated mind like ice-water, and Sesshoumaru felt himself become sane again, pondering it.

Home.

He shifted uncomfortably against the bark of the tree, trying to dislodge the disquieting feeling that had settled in the base of his skull. It felt to him as though there was a tiny part of his mind missing, accidentally knocked loose in haste and left behind in the House of the Moon while he had taken Kagome and slipped away into the world. Now he felt its absence, and it left an itch at the base of his spine, urging him to turn around and go back for it, to assure himself with his own eyes that his home that he had fought so hard for was still standing.

Try as he might he could not shake the sense of foreboding that plagued him, that when he returned, his home would once again lay in smoking ruins. The only difference this time and the last would be that he had removed the things he valued before he left, instead of leaving them at the tender mercies of whoever decided to rise against him.

Sighing, Sesshoumaru shook his head very slightly and wished that he had accidentally left behind the part of his brain that insisted on worrying about things over which he had no current control. He was too far from it to do anything, and, entirely aside from that, whether his house was burned or overrun was not of any consequence; it would be easy enough to take it back. Truly, he need not worry.

A movement from the corner of his eye dragged his attention from the darkness of his head to the light of the fire once again, and he found himself watching as Kagome reached back and began to comb her fingers through her hair, arching her back slightly and wincing at the sensations the gesture produced. Aside from her nausea she was obviously still sore from dragging corpses around.

Unfortunately, to his deep displeasure, the dejected look on her face did not fade even when she slumped into a more comfortable posture; instead the shadows of her eyes grew deeper as her brows drew fretfully together.

She was clearly unhappy about something. Frowning, Sesshoumaru cast about in his head, searching for something to say in hopes of clearing the distressing look from her face.

For her part Kagome was still moping about the cruel fate of heroines without pension plans when Sesshoumaru's voice cut through the quiet, surprising her slightly.

"You did well."

Kagome glanced up, mildly irritated at the interruption of her fascinating self-pity session, only to feel immediately guilty about her reaction.

She turned toward where her reluctant protector reclined at the edge of the small clearing, watching her, and caught his gaze. Blinking, Kagome let herself observe him.

She noted almost absently that the light of the fire turned the gold of his eyes to burnished amber, the silver of his hair to pale gold, transforming him into a creature of warmth rather than of cold. He had also shed his armor in order to sleep, so he looked smaller again, but she was certain this was only an illusion caused by the thickness of his clothes - the heavy fabric of the collar of his kimono and under-kimono fit loosely at the base of his throat, giving the impression that he was scrawny inside his clothing even though Kagome knew for a fact that this was not the case.

Unbidden a vision of him, slightly sweaty and bare to the waist, flashed across her mind, and for a brief moment she gave in to the pleasing memory, feeling that she had earned it.

Maybe being a heroine didn't pay very well, she decided, but at least the eye-candy was nice.

"Kagome?"

Realizing that she was staring at him with what might or might not be an embarrassing expression on her face, Kagome blushed. "Sorry," she muttered. "What did you say?"

He did not seem to have taken offense to her ogling. "I said that you did well today," he repeated for her. His voice was soft and soothing. For a brief moment Kagome felt the corded muscles wrapped tight across her back

release just a little bit, until her stomach twitched in another spasm. She winced.

"Thanks, but you don't have to lie," she said, turning back to the fire.

She didn't have to be looking at him to know that he was frowning. "I do not lie," he said, lightly indignant.

Despite her mood Kagome couldn't help but smile. "That's not what I meant," she said. "I meant that you don't have to flatter me. I can handle the truth." She glanced at him from the corner of her eye.

He had tilted his head, as if she had spoken in a different language, and Kagome wondered if he knew how utterly endearing his perplexity was to her. Her fingers twitched with the urge to reach out and smooth his lightly wrinkled brow - his expression of confusion was so subtle that one had to be looking for it to see it - but she refrained. Instead she smiled wanly. "I mean, I know I didn't do very well. I lost my breakfast and put my hand through some guy's stomach."

She watched as a tiny smile bloomed on his lips, making him more breath-taking than usual. "No," he said, "you did well. Most humans, upon coming across a battlefield, would most likely faint from the smell. You were only ill." His eyes narrowed a little as his gaze slid a foot to her right, to focus on the fire. "You may have even managed to make a good impression," he ventured blandly.

She grinned. "Now you're lying."

His smile widened, just a fraction. "Perhaps. But you should not worry overly much about it. I, myself, have put my hand through many stomachs."

Kagome felt her face twist. "Is that supposed to make me feel better?" she asked. "Because I have to say it's not very comforting to be reminded that you like stabbing people with your hands when you sleep ten feet away from me."

Pursing his lips, Sesshoumaru appeared to contemplate this point. "Really?" he said eventually. "I would have thought it would be reassuring."

"How?"

He smirked a little, the minute flow of his expressions melting fluidly into each other. "Clearly it would be better to be able to kill with one's hands than not; that I am here should be comforting, as if we are disturbed I will be able to adequately dispose of the problem."

Dispose. He makes it sound so nice.

This conversation seemed to have taken a turn for the macabre, and Kagome went back to staring fixedly at the fire. Sometimes, she reflected gloomily, it was really unpleasant to remember that he was a youkai who, pretty hair and pretty body aside, happened to be very, very good at killing things. It was even in his name. Even more disturbing than this, however, was the fact that, in remembering this, she found him even sexier in that weird, power-trippy way that up until now she had not really considered to be appealing.

Stop that, hormones, she scolded herself. This is getting pathetic. Why the hell was she so fixated on him? Clearly, she needed a boyfriend. Preferably one that didn't enjoy going in through the ribs and rummaging around. Unless he was a surgeon. A rich surgeon. And not at all a deadly youkai with pretty hair.

Kagome suppressed both a groan and the urge to bury her face in her hands.

Who's hopeless? she thought almost giddily. It's me! Totally me. I need therapy.

She giggled out loud. God, she could only imagine how that session would go.

So you say you were once in love with a hanyou?

Why yes, doctor, but now he's dead. Incidentally, his half-brother is pretty smokin', seems to enjoy cutting people's heads off, and I think I have a crush on him.

Ah.

Another small spasm squeezed through her abdomen, and Kagome shut her eyes tightly until the pain passed. She didn't dare look at Sesshoumaru,

suddenly feeling irrationally embarrassed that he had witnessed her sickness. It was disgusting, sure, but he'd lived for... ever. Obviously he'd seen such things before. She just wished, at this moment, that he hadn't seen such things connected to her.

Kagome sighed. This was all getting too complicated, and the obvious solution was to stop thinking about it entirely and ignore it. Ignoring problems made them go away, right?

"Why do you laugh?"

She lifted her head and looked at him, only slightly startled. "Did I?" she said. In her head she began to retrace her mental steps, looking for something funny.

Sesshoumaru was staring at her with a peculiar expression on his face; like all his expressions it was subtle, though she was unfamiliar with this one and was therefore unable to pin down what it meant. "You did," he informed her, just as she remembered the whole therapy thing, which she certainly could not share with him.

Kagome giggled again, this time out of nervousness. "Um," she ventured, searching for the right words, "I was just thinking of what I'm going to do once I get home again." Safe!

"And what is that?" he wanted to know.

Not safe! Kagome tried again. "I was actually thinking of all the therapy I'll have to go through when I get back."

The youkai tilted his head, and she couldn't help but stare as an errant tendril of hair brushed against his neck, the muscles beneath the skin thrown into sharp relief by the movement and the firelight. Kagome scooted away from the fire so she could have a better view.

"What is therapy?" he asked.

My, but he was chatty tonight. Kagome gave him a smile before she looked away and pursed her lips, trying to think of some explanation that would

make sense to him.

Sesshoumaru watched as her mouth pouted slightly, and wondered, eyes glazing a little, exactly what she was thinking. She appeared to be pondering deeply over her answer, so he assumed that it was one that required a bit of an explanation - more, perhaps, than she was qualified to give - and she was trying to think of how to phrase it. He already knew that things in her time were far more complicated than they were here, so he decided not to pressure her further and instead settled for observing her as she licked her lips and contemplated.

For a long moment, watching as she ran her little pink tongue over the pouting flesh of her lower lip in pursuit of an answer for him, Sesshoumaru found himself transfixed by its motion. Over and over it swept - there was no harm in watching, right? watching meant nothing - before slipping back between her lips. Over and over, again and again, and then he slipped and for a hot, dizzy moment he could not stop himself from imagining chasing that little tongue with his own.

But no, no, no. That was not allowed. And yet he was so tense and she was so terribly distracting that he could almost forget the problems surrounding them. She relaxed him.

Until, that is, he felt, at least one of their problems begin to assert itself at the corner of his consciousness

The unwelcome pleasure he found in watching her faded immediately, leaving behind only anger with himself and the tickle of danger at the edge of his mind. A frown began to tug at his features.

Kagome, oblivious to his sudden distraction, finally alighted on a proper explanation. "Therapy is..." she started, then paused, frowning. "Therapy is when you go to a doctor and you talk about your problems."

Sesshoumaru, only half-listening, dredged a vague response from his divided brain. "Illness?" he asked absently.

At the edge of his mind, something he knew all too well, something that up until now had never been a problem, was stirring coldly, creeping ever closer.

Shaking her head, Kagome rolled her eyes. "No. Yes. Well, sort of," she fumbled, still staring at the flames. "Sort of like illnesses in the head, but not really. I mean, you talk about your relationships with other people, and the things that bother you, and bad things that happened to you when you were five and that make you wake up at night, or whatever."

When he spoke again, he sounded even more distant and scattered than before. "Relationships?" The puzzlement beneath his voice, spreading out like cracks on a frozen lake, inspired a giggle to bubble in her throat. Kagome squashed it ruthlessly; she wanted to encourage his questions, not discourage them.

She pressed her lips into a thin line and stared at nothing. "Yeah. Like..." She squinted, trying to think of an example. "Like... okay, you know you and Inuyasha? You guys had a bad relationship, and so one or the other of you, or both of you, I guess, could go and talk to someone and try to work out your problems with each other."

Sesshoumaru didn't say anything to that, but Kagome was suddenly aware of a thickening of the air between them. Sliding her gaze to the tree where he sat, she saw his face growing darker, drawing down with displeasure until he looked positively menacing.

Hastily she turned away again and tried to amend her explanation. "I mean," she continued, voice gaining a slightly shrill edge, "Inuyasha would go to the therapist, and he'd say, 'my brother hates me and tries to kill me,' and the therapist would say, 'why do you think he does that?' and then Inuyasha would say, 'because he envies my sword -'"

Kagome was dimly aware she was babbling, but she couldn't seem to stop. With fascinated trepidation she listened to the suicidal diatribe spilling out of her mouth.

" - and then he'd break down crying and be forced to pay the therapist twenty thousand yen for an hour, and eventually he might ask you to come with him to therapy and you might be forced to talk about how much you hate your father and you would both hug and cry and end up recon - "

There was the sensation of whiteness, of wind, and silk, whipping past her face - on her nose she felt the sharp sting from the lashing of the hem of a sleeve - and then she was alone in the clearing.

" - ciling," she finished dejectedly.

Well, what had she expected would be the result of that little speech? Miserably, she folded herself into an upright fetal position again, though this time the pain was centered in her chest. Stupid.

The fire crackled loudly, and she felt very alone. First burying dead bodies, now this.

There was a lump in her throat.

"And then I would go to a therapist and wonder why I always manage to sabotage all my relationships with men," she muttered darkly, letting her head come to rest on her knees, hugging her legs to her.

Stupid, she thought. Stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid. Miserably, Kagome squeezed her eyes shut.

And in the darkness of the forest beyond the firelight, Sesshoumaru let his mind go blank until he knew nothing but the bite of the earth beneath his boots, the wind weaving through his hair, and the sudden, sharp smell of -

After a long moment there was the crunch of a footfall on a branch.

Kagome's head snapped up, every muscle in her body tensing, as Sesshoumaru emerged from the trees around her and back into the circle of firelight.

"Um..." she said.

The youkai lord's eyes fell on her, pinning her to the ground.

He had a very thoughtful look on his face.

Swallowing hard, her own eyes widening, Kagome attempted damage control.

"I'm sorry!" she said desperately, unfolding to her knees and leaning toward where he stood, nearly begging. "I didn't mean to offend you! I know you and Inuyasha had a terrible relationship and you would never have it any other way and he was a stain on your honor or something and you didn't hate your father and wouldn't cry or hug Inuyasha, and I just wasn't thinking!"

He said nothing.

Kagome felt tears swelling up. "Sesshoumaru," she said softly, "I am so, so - "

Deliberately, Sesshoumaru raised a glistening, claw-tipped hand, and flicked blood from his fingers.

Kagome shut up.

He was still looking at her thoughtfully as he lifted his fingers to his mouth and sucked the blood away, very deliberately, and once again she found herself struggling to keep her writhing stomach in check.

Then, very as though finally deciding on something, he strode to where she sat, bent, and snaked an arm around her. Ignoring her surprised squeak he lifted her easily in one hand before gathering her sleeping bag in the other and walking back to the tree where he had been sitting scant moments before. With a quick snap of his hand, the sleeping bag was laid out beneath the tree, and he was lowering her to the slick fabric.

"Hey - " she protested feebly. She was tingling beneath the pressure of his hands, and his long hair brushed over her skin as he set her down, causing her to shiver.

Then he straightened, took one step to the side, and lowered himself against the tree, resuming his former position and not seeming to care that his knee was actually brushing against her leg.

"You will sleep here with me," he said.

She could tell that it wasn't a question or even a statement, but an order, and something snapped.

"Excuse me!" Kagome retorted sharply, suddenly rankled by his attitude. She pushed herself into a half-sitting position, propped up on one elbow so she could better yell at him. "That was really rude! I like sleeping by the fire. What the hell?"

The youkai lord next to her spared her a startled glance, as if he were surprised that she would take issue with his sudden manhandling.

For his part, Sesshoumaru was attempting to order his thoughts into some semblance of coherence and managing to fail rather spectacularly. Swiftly he closed his eyes and tried to block out all outside distractions, a task that was suddenly much more difficult than it had been two seconds ago due to the fact that Kagome seemed disinclined to move away from him.

So, he thought to himself, struggling to ignore both the fact that Kagome was practically sitting in his lap and his disappointment that she was not doing so, what do we have here?

We have one dead youkai. He concentrated on the sobering thought.

One dead, stupid youkai that he had vaguely recognized, as he had run across him once or twice while patrolling his lands. This particular demon was - no, wait, had been, Sesshoumaru corrected himself, this particular demon had been - high level, but only barely. His human form was only human in the loosest of senses; he still retained most of his serpentine features - eyes bugged and slitted, tongue long and limber, slight brown-green cast to his skin - and was rather thick, as only a fool would approach Kagome while he was at her side.

Or rather, only a fool would approach her with the kill on his mind, unless they believed him to be so weak as to be incapable of defending her. Which was foolish.

Foolish and insulting.

Well, no matter, he supposed glumly. The lizard was dead and was no longer around to insult him, but the fact that he'd had only one night of respite before the hunt had begun did not bode well for the next month. While normally he would look forward to a month of diverting engagements such as this, for

some reason Sesshoumaru found himself disheartened rather than invigorated by the prospect. There was, of course, the enjoyable knowledge that he was essentially crushing all who opposed him, but under that was the less-than-enjoyable knowledge that 'all who opposed him' was probably a very large number. He did not foresee much rest in the coming weeks.

The very thin and quite tarnished silver lining to this cloud seemed to be that his life was interesting again. Indeed, even the very immediate future promised to be full of incident.

Which brought him to Kagome.

What else do we have? We have one vulnerable miko. One vulnerable, maddening miko to whom he had devoted far too much of himself. It was somehow worse to know that, while he was not entirely certain how much too much happened to be, it was most certainly still too much for his own good.

And we have one foolish inuyoukai, incapable of learning from his mistakes.

Apparently he truly was an idiot. Who would have guessed?

But even though he knew exactly how to rectify this problem that still did not mean that he was going to do so.

With melancholy resignation Sesshoumaru found himself assuming a state of suicidal calm concerning the situation, seeming to accept the fact that, one way or another, he was headed straight for calamity.

There. Simple.

She was still glaring at him, demanding to know why she had suddenly been subjected to forcible relocation. Sesshoumaru blinked beneath the weight of her gaze.

"Apologies," he said abruptly. "It is not safe for you to be far away."

To his surprise, he felt her relax a little, her body draping more comfortably against the ground. "Oh," she replied.

"You understand," he said.

Kagome, still a tad stunned, blinked at the sound of his voice.

You understand.

It wasn't really a question, but it wasn't a statement either. It sounded almost like a plea, as if he were worried that she would be angry, or upset with him. She wasn't quite certain what he wanted to hear from her.

Somewhere in the trauma of the day, Kagome had forgotten that she was in danger. The events of the past five minutes - his extreme displeasure, his rapid departure, the blood on his claws - made sense to her now. He had killed a demon that had been hunting them. Or her.

Kagome shuddered, and suddenly his hand was resting against her face, high on her cheekbone, long fingers subtly weaving through the hair at her temple. Her eyes snapped to his face, and she could not turn away from him.

She watched as, very, very slowly, Sesshoumaru ran his thumb over the arch of her eyebrow and stole her breath. He was staring at his own hand as though it were foreign to him, as if he had no control over it, as if he were surprised that it had fastened itself in her hair; he looked as though he had no idea how he had arrived here, at this time and in this place, with her.

"You understand," he repeated, and the strange, pleading note strung through his words tugged at something deep behind her chest.

"Yes," she finally said, feeling somewhat helpless.

He nodded, suddenly withdrawing and folding his hands into his sleeves, as if he had never touched her.

"Go to sleep," he commanded.

She felt the rumble of his voice roll through her and she shivered again, though this time it was not out of fear.

Taking a deep breath, Kagome lowered herself again to the sleeping bag

beneath her and closed her eyes, but she could not escape the fact that he was so close to her and yet still so far away. She felt exposed.

She could hear him breathing.

Troubled, Kagome let her fingers creep across the ground, almost of their own accord, until her fingertips brushed over cool silk. She heard his small intake of breath as he tensed when she let herself grab his sleeve and drag it closer to her body, resting the hand attached to it against her chest. After a moment she heard a long, low sigh, and felt him relax.

She was glad he was not going to reclaim his clothes. Connected to him now she felt... safe. Protected. Absently, she wove the white trailing fabric of his sleeve through her fingers, drawing it around her hand like a shield and, for the first time in a long while, when she finally sank down into dreams, Kagome slept truly peacefully.

* * *

Very calmly Kagome reflected that today had really not lived up to its promise upon waking, though as she had essentially awoken curled up against a very finely shaped leg, there had been very few ways for the day to get any better so she should probably not have been surprised. She sighed and suppressed a yawn. Poorly.

Then, for the thirteenth time that day, Fuyu hit her over the head with a wooden spoon.

"Ow!" Kagome cried, snatching her hands away from the bandage she was securing.

Unfair! her mind protested. It was just a yawn! A yawn. Give me a break! Miserably she shied away, throwing her arms up to protect herself, though even that gesture seemed to take reserves of energy she didn't have. She wasn't a machine, after all, and considering the way she felt Fuyu should just be happy she wasn't nose down in maggoty wounds. Dammit, the woman was lucky she was only yawning!

At the thought of yawning, Kagome suppressed another yawn.

God, but she was so tired.

It wasn't even that she hadn't slept well - she had slept marvelously, in fact - but that she had not slept much; it had been quite late when she had finally drifted off and she had been exhausted to begin with. That in and of itself would not have been so bad except that Fuyu had demanded that she be up and about before dawn, and though Kagome had found a great deal of vaguely illicit pleasure waking up next to Sesshoumaru, she had also found a great deal of extraordinarily cranky displeasure at being woken while it was still dark.

There had been hand on her shoulder, gently shaking her awake.

Her limbs were heavy and sore, and her stomach was still upset. No, she had thought sullenly. She was still so tired...

As though reading her mind the owner of the hand had paused in its movement, and Kagome began to sink back down into slumber.

The shaking started up again, more earnestly this time.

"No," she mumbled petulantly to her tormentor.

"Yes," Sesshoumaru murmured.

At that low rumble of his voice the more wanton parts of her brain had decided that she was just sleepy enough to claim ignorance of anything she did while half-conscious, and so she scooted closer to him and latched on to his hakama - in addition to still holding his sleeve - before pressing her face against his thigh.

Oh wait. Yes, she agreed with him, in the privacy of her head.

It was - it felt - so nice and she was so tired that entirely unconsciously she squirmed a little against him in an attempt to burrow. It was so nice, in fact, that she almost missed the strange stiffening of his limbs before his hands moved to hers in an attempt to carefully disengage her fingers from the folds of his clothing. This only made her cling tighter.

After a minute of this small battle of wills she had felt him shake her one last time, but, as she was too busy snuggling further against him to respond, he finally sighed and stood up. She was holding his clothes so tightly that she pulled herself into a half-sitting position before her sleep-slackened limbs failed her and she hit the ground.

That woke her fully.

"Ow!" she protested, glaring at Sesshoumaru as if it were his fault.

"You told me you needed to be up before dawn," he informed her blandly as he straightened his clothing. Secretly, Kagome found herself mildly disappointed to see that she had not managed to divest him of his shirt in her undignified tumble, but reluctantly nodded her head.

"Right," she said. "Sorry." Absently Kagome flexed her fingers - how tightly had she been holding his sleeve anyway? Had she really held it all night? - before bringing her hands to her face and rubbing vigorously in an attempt to work some life into herself. She felt like a zombie.

After a few moments of unsuccessful attempted resurrection, she climbed to her feet despite the screaming protests of her body and tripped to her backpack. Blearily she had rummaged around in its depths for a long moment until she suddenly withdrew triumphantly, holding aloft the scrap of rough fabric she used to wash herself. Grabbing her clothes and the bar of soap that she had left out to dry, she began to stumble in the general direction of the stream.

Kagome was almost at the water before she realized that he had followed her.

"Excuse me?" she said turning around to glare at him. "It's rude to watch a lady bathe."

Sesshoumaru only shrugged, a strange, absent look in his eyes, as though he were not really seeing her. Kagome let out a huff of annoyance. "Hello?" she said, taking a step toward him.

With a little tremor, the youkai lord appeared to shake himself out of his

strange, faraway trance. "What?" he said, as though he had not heard her.

She ground her teeth. "What are you doing here?" she demanded.

He shrugged, though this time she could tell that he was answering her question and not merely executing a reflexive gesture at the sound of her voice. "Youkai," he said simply.

Kagome recalled the blood and flushed in exasperation as she suppressed a shudder.

"Fine," she had said. "But can't you at least give me some privacy?"

She watched as he blinked, and then turned and walked back into the trees.

He had effectively ruined the last of her languor. Hastily she scrubbed herself down and changed into the sturdier, warmer haori and hakama before she had hurried back through the trees to their little campsite. She found him standing under the tree beneath which they had slept, appearing to sniff the air, entirely failing to acknowledge her presence.

More discomfited than ever, Kagome had bent down and quickly removed as many extraneous items as possible from her backpack, setting them down next to her sleeping bag before shouldering the green monstrosity and turning in the direction of the shrine.

Sesshoumaru said nothing when he drew alongside her. In fact, he resisted all her attempts at conversation and had remained silent during the entire trek through the trees and across the field to the shrine, not taking his eyes off the path in front of them except to lift his head and sniff the air from time to time.

All of this had conspired to make Kagome a nervous wreck by the time they had reached the long flight of steps leading up to the main building. He hadn't even said anything when she had cheerfully bade him a wavering goodbye; instead he only looked at her intently before nodding his head in an absent-minded way and turned his back on her. She watched as his white figure floated across the field to disappear into the forest, where he would probably to catch up on all the sleep he'd missed out on by waking her. But she wasn't bitter about that. Not at all.

Ass.

Even so, Kagome was deeply regretting telling him that she had needed to be up before dawn as clearly she was not energetic enough to last the day. The moment she had crested the shrine steps, already weary, her mentor had greeted her with a sharp rap on the head and a scolding for being late. Now Kagome found herself nearly dead on her feet, but she didn't even care if it earned a beating with an even larger and more lethal kitchen utensil from Fuyu - the extra sleep might have been worth it.

As it was she was already developing an almost Pavlovian reaction to the spoon, so that even when Fuyu lifted the hand that held it to do something else - use it to root through the basket next to her, or to scratch her back - she flinched.

Why a spoon and where the hatchet-faced miko had acquired it was a complete mystery to Kagome, but aside from its use as crevasse-scraper it seemed to be the sour woman's favorite toy. Each time Kagome slipped or failed to do something perfectly the old miko would whack her across the crown of the head with it, usually accompanying her assault with the words, 'pay attention,' or 'foolish girl,' or 'no! no!' as if she were no more than an errant puppy. It was beginning to get annoying, and Kagome was certain that she would have an impressive collection of knots on her scalp by the end of the day. She did not look forward to trying to sleep that night, nor to the amount of aspirin she would be forced to inhale.

Kagome sighed as she winced at this newest insult to her person.

At her reaction to Fuyu's correctional methods the samurai whose injury she was currently attending gave her an unkind smirk, and only with truly monumental self-restraint did Kagome decline to squeeze down on the festering wound in his arm that she was attempting to bind. Admittedly a lot of her restraint came from the knowledge that if his wound were not better tomorrow then Fuyu would be forced to cut away the green, runny bits from the man's arm, but she still felt miffed.

She settled for wrinkling her nose at him. He leered at her.

"Foolish girl!" Fuyu squawked, ignoring the hostile engagement occurring between her patient and her assistant. "Pay attention!" She raised her arm as though to strike again.

Quickly Kagome covered her head with her arms, the ends of the bandage loosening when she let go. "What the hell did I do now?" she said plaintively.

The old miko's face twisted in clear distaste, an action that caused her old, sun-weathered features to crease even further into their well-worn wrinkles, and left Kagome with the impression of a pointy, constipated raisin. "Tie it tight!" Fuyu squawked. "Tight, girl, tight! What do you think you're doing, tying up your hair?"

"But - " Kagome began.

"And why isn't your hair tied anyway?" she added, not allowing Kagome to protest the order with words like 'circulation' and 'tourniquet' and 'nerve death.' "Go tie it up!"

When she hesitated, Fuyu whapped the spoon against her arm, causing her to yelp and tumble sideways.

"Now! Now!" she barked.

Hurriedly, Kagome scrambled the ten feet to her backpack. Rooting around inside, she reflected for the umpteenth time that she was glad she had thought to bring the enormous bag with her; at the very least her wide collection of bandages and strange, medicinal unguents had caused Fuyu to grunt her grudging approval.

The second her fingers closed on an elastic band, she hauled it out of the depths, as she was too annoyed and too tired to bother fishing out a more acceptable ribbon. Raking her hands through her hair she pulled it back into a high ponytail and savagely bound it, gritting her teeth at the bangs that fell in her eyes. It had been a while since she'd had a trim, and now she found herself a little peeved that she had failed to find the time to see to it before she'd jumped into the well.

No scissors, she thought idly. Just one of a myriad of things she lacked here in

the past.

Fluffing them as best she could she quickly turned back to Fuyu and the samurai with the infected arm, drawing up next to the old miko who was currently finishing Kagome's clearly inferior mummification job.

"This is how you tie a bandage on a wound like this," Fuyu said authoritatively. "None of your weak little knots." With this announcement, she yanked on the ends of the bandage, tightening it. The man's face twisted in pain, and Kagome could see that he was clenching his teeth in order to keep from crying out. Glaring down at him, Fuyu stood and brushed the detritus of the courtyard from her knees. "That wouldn't hurt so much if you'd kept it clean like I told you," she said. Kagome thought this was only rubbing salt in an already grievous wound, but kept her thoughts to herself.

From the corner of her eye, Kagome watched as Fuyu surveyed the gathering that had filled her shrine with the air of one who was itching to do some painful good in the world. Suppressing a grimace, Kagome let her attention likewise wander to the activity that was going on around her.

It was mid-afternoon. She should have been learning combat at this point in the day, but the sun had already passed the midpoint in the sky and Kagome had yet to find a suitable stopping point in their work so that she could excuse herself and go begging for instruction. She sighed with regret as she watched the samurai around her.

Some of the soldiers were already packing up and getting ready to leave - their injuries had been minor enough for them to depart after they had finished with the battlefield - and Kagome could see that some of them had loaded pieces of scavenged armor onto their backs, no doubt to sell or trade on their way home or on their way back to their daimyo for the next battle. She couldn't help but feel a tiny twinge of distaste at the idea, but she knew that such things were the way of this world.

Less cheering were the other soldiers up and about, stretching their limbs, moping over their wounds, or helping with the upkeep of the shrine that had sheltered and healed them. Still others were reclining quietly in the shade, too hurt to move, sleeping through their pain. She knew she would have to tend most of them before her time here was finished.

And here she was, moaning about a few lumps on her head. It was all rather depressing.

From the corner of her eye, Kagome caught the slight twitch of Fuyu's spoon-hand, and hastily she bent to gather the basket full of medical supplies to her chest; after all, even if she couldn't tie a bandage to satisfaction, she could at least make a good pack horse.

The older miko looked almost disappointed that Kagome had thwarted her rod of correction, but the look was so brief that Kagome was uncertain whether she had seen it at all. Swiftly Fuyu turned around and strode along the row of soldiers, her eagle eye singling out those who needed her help most today, and Kagome found herself stumbling along behind, shuffling to keep the unwieldy, overflowing basket steady in her arms.

Only about fifteen meters away Fuyu found someone else who needed to suffer her attention, and Kagome almost ran over her when she knelt down next to a man who was clearly favoring a black and blue arm.

Fuyu didn't spare her a glance.

With as much dignity as possible Kagome knelt next to her as the old miko inspected the forearm of the older man with one long, pointy finger. With each poke, the man winced and let out a whimper of pain.

"Why didn't you say something before?" Fuyu demanded sharply.

The soldier just shook his head; if Kagome hadn't known better, she would have sworn that he was wary of Fuyu..

"Hmmph," the miko replied, clearly displeased. She turned to Kagome and gave her an appraising look before her eyes flickered to the sky.

Kagome held her breath.

Fuyu lowered her eyes to her face again. "Found someone to teach you swordplay yet?" she demanded.

Blinking at the non-sequitur, Kagome mutely shook her head. "I haven't had any ti - "

"Good," Fuyu cut her off. "Because I'm going to need you this afternoon, too."

Kagome's heart fell. "Oh," was all she could think to say.

She watched as the old woman lifted her arms and shook the long, bell-like sleeves of her haori down to her elbows.

"So," she said bluntly, "how would you like to learn how to set a bone, girl?"

"Uh," Kagome said intelligently.

Fuyu ignored her. "Here, take his wrist."

Gingerly, Kagome moved forward, noticing that the soldier was eyeing her with great distrust. The feeling was entirely mutual.

Please don't hit me when I do this, she thought fervently as her fingers wrapped tentatively around the man's wrist. His skin was cool and dry under her slightly sweaty palm, and Kagome found that she had to withdraw her hand and wipe it on her hakama first before reclaiming the appendage.

"Tighter, girl," Fuyu snapped. "Now grab him here." With a long bony finger, the old woman poked at the fleshy part of the man's forearm, just below his elbow.

"Miko-sama," the man said nervously, "is this girl - ?"

"She's my assistant," Fuyu said, cutting him off. "Is that not good enough for you?"

The man seemed to quail beneath the stony glare she trained on him. "Never mind," he muttered, looking away.

The old woman just nodded, and placed her hands on Kagome's own. "Good," she said, adjusting her grip to be firm against Kagome's fingers. "You feel that little bend, where the bone's slightly off?"

Frowning, Kagome looked intently at the man's arm, trying to see the break.

Abruptly one of the hands left hers, and Kagome winced. Her expectation was satisfied when she felt the sharp rap across her crown.

"Ow," she muttered reflexively, and she heard the man snigger. Suddenly she felt a lot less uncomfortable jerking his bones back into place.

"Don't look," Fuyu instructed, placing her hands back on those of her apprentice, "feel."

Kagome jerked her head in a quick nod, tightening her grip.

There was only the slightest intake of breath to warn her.

"And - " Fuyu muttered, and then her strong hands wrenched and twisted.

The man shrieked, his eyes rolling back in his head, and Kagome dropped his arm as he snatched it away, afraid that she would hurt him further. The sounds of his pain made her skin bunch together and try to crawl off the top of her head.

"Damn!" the old miko exclaimed over the man's groans. "Didn't I tell you to grip him hard?"

"Oh god - " This was her fault? Great. "I'm so sorry, I didn't mean - "

"Again! Grip him again!"

Behind her, Kagome heard a chorus of lascivious giggles bubble up from the surrounding men, clearly entertained by this unintended double entendre. Face flaming scarlet, Kagome reached out and grabbed the man's wrist again, clamping down so hard she thought she might cut off his circulation. Fuyu's hands went around her own again, but this time they didn't feel as tight.

"Now pay attention!" the woman barked.

Together their hands tensed, and beneath her fingers Kagome felt the man try

to escape one last time before Fuyu jerked her arms, bringing the two pieces of bone together.

Crunch.

Kagome's stomach turned violently at the sound, but the man had nearly passed out from the pain and Fuyu had already drawn a thick splint from the bottom of her basket. Kagome watched as she placed it against the man's arm and began to wind length after length of bandage around it.

"Ugh," was Kagome's comment when the old woman finished. Fuyu just gave her a disdainful look.

"I've a lot of things to do this afternoon. Think you're ready to set bones on your own?" she asked scornfully.

Closing her eyes, Kagome groaned.

Fuyu hit her with the spoon.

* * *

The slight drag of skin pulled at his fingers, and then the youkai's head was rolling down the slight incline of the hill, the muscles of its neck already being eaten away with poison and glistening in the late afternoon sunshine.

There really was nothing like the feel of flesh parting beneath his claws, Sesshoumaru reflected as he surveyed his gruesome handiwork, and the extra shot of poison released - which, for some reason, always seemed doubly relaxing - was just a bonus on top of it. And yet there seemed to be little joy in this exercise today, and, now that he thought of it, the slaying of the lizard last night hadn't held much satisfaction either; normally Sesshoumaru would find himself reveling in the defeat of his enemies, but at the moment he only felt a little tired, as though the task of slaughter had become tedious to him.

It was a terrible feeling.

There had never been a time when he could not find some scrap of pleasure in

laying low those that sought his downfall, and the fact that he failed to do so now was plaguing him. He had entertained and then discarded the notion that since these particular enemies were there for Kagome's blood and not his own the joy was leeched from the kill, but as she was under his protection it stood to reason that anyone who attacked her attacked him as well. Then he had thought it might be because he knew there were many more waiting to replace these, but that idea should have filled him with relish instead of this strange ennui.

He could not figure it out, and all day his mind had been straying from his patrol to Kagome, and then to his home, and then back to Kagome again. In many ways he was a very single-minded man, and this feeling of being split between loyalties was strange and disconcerting to him; his home was his land was his charge to protect, and yet she was...

Was...

For the millionth time, Sesshoumaru gave up on trying to define her. Surely he was far too invested in one human girl, and he knew all too well where this road led; why he had let this happen again - and, worse, why he allowed this to continue - was a mystery to him, but all his half-hearted struggles to change the strange tug she inspired were in vain. Kagome ruined his world, tossed it all into disarray, and yet he couldn't get rid of her no matter how badly he wanted to.

He couldn't even find any joy in slaughter. His satisfaction in the kill was so terribly grim, and there were more coming didn't inspire in him any anticipation; on the contrary he found that he dreaded it.

Deeply disgruntled, Sesshoumaru lifted his head and sniffed the wind. There had only been the scent of one hostile youkai all day - the tiny, harmless spirits that lived in trees and rocks could be safely left alone - and he could not smell another one. He did not know whether to be grateful or suspicious of this fortuitous occurrence, and, growling, he wondered why he was making himself so miserable for such an insignificant human woman.

He could still kill her. He could simply abandon her. Every day spent with her just caused them to become more and more entangled, caused him to think of her more and more, and things became progressively worse. She was such a

huge problem; he couldn’t afford to get any more involved with her for many reasons, and yet he just couldn’t walk away.

There was a cold feeling in his gut whenever she crossed his mind. Had he killed all the threats to her? Had he ensured her safety sufficiently? What if she was under attack at the shrine and he had not detected it?

Why did this bother him so much more than the thought of his home which was, at this moment, only half-way defended?

Why was he doing this again?

Unease crept through his chest, chill and hollow.

He felt the pull of his home at the base of his spine, but he could also smell, on the wind, the scent of the shrine, full of holy power and sickness, and somewhere within it, so lost that he could not sense her, was the woman.

For a long moment his feet twitched as he felt himself tugged in two different directions before he sighed in defeat.

Sesshoumaru turned toward the stronger pull and leapt away.

Back at the shrine and oblivious to Sesshoumaru's inner turmoil, Kagome watched with exhausted amusement as their current patient strove to make himself more trouble than he was worth.

He was a nondescript samurai, with black hair and brown eyes and a strangely sardonic face, and he seemed to be deliriously intoxicated. Fuyu was attempting wrestle a bottle of sake out of his hands but, unfortunately, he didn't seem to want to let go of it.

"Stop it!" she snapped as Kagome knelt behind her mentor and hovered. Her hard, bony hands slapped at the man's fingers. "You need water, not sake!"

Kagome stole a glance at the recalcitrant man. His skin appeared waxy and drawn, but his face was lively enough as he smirked at the older miko and he did not seem to be particularly ill or in any pain, though the fact that he was drunk might have had something to do with that. She wondered what was

wrong with him.

"But miko-san," he said lightly, though his hands on the bottle were like a vise, "water doesn't drown the pain as well."

"You'd have less pain sooner if you stopped drinking sake!" Fuyu almost shouted. "Where do you get this stuff anyway? I told you no more!"

Kagome watched as the man's lips parted in a strange grin full of bizarrely pearly teeth, and she realized that he was still very young. "It's a secret," he whispered almost maniacally.

Fuyu's eyes narrowed dangerously. "If I ever find out who's bringing you all this sake I'm going to skin them alive. Then I'll skin you alive!"

"Why don't you skin me alive now, miko-san?" the samurai suggested, sounding almost sincere. "Then I'd be out of your hair, and you wouldn't have to yell at me for drinking."

"Because I have a duty, whelp! As much as I wish your tongue would rot out of your head, I have a duty to see to your well-being!" She tugged harder on the bottle, and involuntarily Kagome scooted backwards, away from the struggle. "As undeserving of that well-being as you may be!" Fuyu added, sniffing.

"Yes, miko-san," the man said. "And if you would let me drink sake in peace, my well-being would be secured."

The old woman was livid. "You ungrateful - !" she began.

"Oh my, miko-san, temper! I didn't know holy women were allowed such language."

"Bah!" she cried. "I didn't know samurai lacked such self-control!"

"It takes much self-control to put up with your nagging."

Fuyu gave another ferocious tug on the bottle. "You keep this up and you'll drink yourself to death," she snapped.

"If only you would let me," he remarked mildly.

"Maybe I - " Fuyu began.

Without warning the samurai let go of the sake and Fuyu, overbalanced from her tugging, jerked backwards. The bottle flew out of her hands to drift through the air, over and over, until it came down to smash against the stones, and Kagome flinched at the sound of shattering pottery. There was, quite obviously, no more liquid left in it.

"Stupid," Fuyu muttered before turning to Kagome. "Go clean that up."

Speechless, Kagome nodded and shot to her feet, shuffling anxiously away from them, though she could hear Fuyu scolding the man - you drunk bastard - and the man responding to her accusations - heartless bitch - as the squabble continued behind her.

I am so out of my league, she thought miserably. Dead bodies, gangrene, surly patients, wooden spoons. This was so not part of the plan.

When she arrived at the scene of the crime she realized that she couldn't very well pick up the sharp pieces one by one and carry them out of the way, and she frowned in annoyance. Glancing around quickly Kagome finally spotted an empty basket someone had left at the side of the main house, and she retrieved it before kneeling down next to the broken bottle. To her relief it hadn't broken into very many pieces - one of the advantages of pottery over glass, she supposed - and the pieces weren't as sharp as she had expected. She sighed with relief as she gathered the large shards and placed them in the basket, though the smell of alcohol that still clung to them made her stomach, which seemed to have settled into a permanent state of delicacy, turn over just a little.

She coughed, loading smooth curves of clay onto the stiff woven grass, until the stones beneath her feet were completely clear.

For a moment, Kagome sat quietly and stared at the broken bottle, her fatigue nearly overwhelming as the bright, sinking sun casting the chunks of pottery in sharp shadows that made her eyes hurt. She wondered what to do with it now.

Over her shoulder, Fuyu and the ill samurai were still sniping back and forth at each other, and Kagome felt almost grateful to the man for being so unwieldy that even Fuyu had trouble with him, because it meant that she was safe from the spoon for another minute or two.

Heaving a sigh, she looked up to study the shrine around her and, entirely unexpectedly, her eyes fell upon the white-clad figure of Sesshoumaru, perched gracefully in one of the towering trees overshadowing the opposite wall - the eastern wall - across the compound. She almost gasped in surprise before reining herself in.

He was looking at her strangely, and even when she caught his sharp gaze he did not look away, merely narrowed his eyes.

Normally she would have skipped a few heartbeats to be the object of such intense scrutiny, but the peculiar look on his face was so queer that she couldn't help but catch her breath at the low stirring in her stomach. In her cheeks she could feel the blood prickle as her mouth went dry.

His expression was so odd, as if he had suddenly found something thought forever lost, and yet he was still dissatisfied -

Kagome blinked, and the moment was gone. His eyes slid away from hers and in a whirl of white silk and silver hair he was gone again. Kagome stared after him, captivated and trying to catch her breath.

Still kneeling on the stones of the courtyard, Kagome was dangerously close to losing all forward momentum and becoming entirely sedentary, and she would have if it hadn't been for Fuyu's watchful eye.

The sharp thwap of the spoon brought Kagome back to the land of the living.

"Ow!" she squealed, hands flying to the impressive knot of bumps that she had collected since dawn.

"Stop that!" Fuyu squawked, waving the spoon in perilous circles. "I've lost most of my apprentices like that!"

Kneeling in a defensive position, peace shattered, Kagome gave in to the urge to snap back. "Like how?" she demanded to know. "By giving them all concussions?"

"Of course not! None of them were as stupid as you!" Fuyu retorted. "I lost them because they wouldn't stop doing what you were doing!"

"Resting?" Kagome asked snidely, reaching for the basket of pottery shards.

"No! Staring at men!"

Kagome froze and, with great effort, she concentrated very, very hard on disappearing. She was deeply disappointed that it didn't seem to work.

Come on, random bolt of lightening! she thought. Come on, alien abduction!

From the corner of her eye, Kagome saw the wooden spoon twitch in the old woman's bony hand. The sight spurred her into action. Hastily she grabbed the basket and stood, trying to ignore the fact that her face was burning so brightly she could have guided planes in for landing, but even though she was blushing, she wasn't going to give Fuyu the satisfaction of seeing her bow her head in embarrassment.

Kagome lifted her chin and glared at the older miko.

Fuyu scoffed and turned away, shaking her head and sending her grey hair tossing. "So prideful," she muttered. Without another word she began to saunter off, back toward the line of convalescents shored up against the western wall of the shrine. Kagome stood, rooted in place.

After about six or seven steps Fuyu slowed and looked back over her shoulder. "Well?" she said. "Put those pieces by the main house. I'm sure we'll find a use for them. Then it's time you learned how to stitch up a stomach."

* * *

Kagome stumbled into camp just as the sun sank below the horizon to find Sesshoumaru, armor already discarded, propped against a tree. A fire was

already crackling cheerfully. Unceremoniously she dumped her backpack on the ground and flopped down in the dirt.

"This job sucks," she announced.

Sesshoumaru didn't say anything, merely cracked his golden eyes and gave her a knowing look.

She stuck her tongue out at him.

He smirked, the strangeness she had seen in him at the shrine seemingly gone or buried. "I would put that away, unless I were meaning to use it," he said mildly.

Unfortunately, Kagome had been listening to the vague sexual suggestions of the soldiers all day, and was completely unfazed by his clearly teasing innuendo. She wasn't certain when, exactly, their banter had taken on sexual undertones, but with him she wasn't going to complain. It was everyone else she was annoyed with. "Hah!" she barked. "This is a perfectly acceptable use. I am expressing my annoyance with you."

She saw his eyebrows hike up fractionally. "Oh, really?" he said. "Why is that?"

"Because you got to sit around in a tree all day and I got used for piñata practice!"

"Piñata?"

"Never mind," she replied, brushing him off. "I thought you were supposed to be out and about, on the prowl for youkai! Don't you have things to kill?" Though she couldn't sense any other demons nearby that did not necessarily mean there weren't any, and even if she was correct there were always wild animals to play with.

Play with. Yes. Distantly Kagome felt her eyes lose focus as she entertained a brief vision of Sesshoumaru, vaguely puzzled look on his face, batting a bear around and wondering why the bear didn't seem to be enjoying itself.

In front of her he shrugged, drawing her back into the present. "There was no

current threat," he informed her mildly, obviously content with this state of affairs. Clearly he didn't think the constant abuse of her person by spoon-wielding mikos constituted a threat. Darn. No threat indeed.

"That's not the point!" she snapped at him, temper short. "The point is..."

She trailed off, frowning, trying to think through the pain and the fog.

Pain and fog? she thought. Oh, yes... "The point... the point is that my head hurts, I'm tired, I had to do a lot of really gross things, and I'm never touching a man again because all they do is give me creepy looks!" Kagome crossed her arms in a show of towering petulance. "I thought people were supposed to respect mikos! I was given no end of respect on my way over here, but now I just get innuendo'd at and you sit in trees! And I'm the one dressing their stupid wounds! What the hell?"

Feeling she had adequately expressed her displeasure, Kagome hugged her legs to her, rested her chin on her knees, and pouted at the fire, as though trying to garner its sympathy.

It crackled merrily away. Stupid fire, Kagome thought, and poked it.

Sesshoumaru had found her little diatribe slightly difficult to follow, but he thought he had the general idea. She was unhappy about the less savory things soldiers tended to say to women they suspected of being less than chaste. Yes, she wore the miko outfit, but they had all seen him arrive with her; it wasn't difficult to figure out what they were thinking. After all, the thought had most certainly crossed his own mind once or ten times, though it was always ruthlessly quashed before he could pursue it. Well, before he could pursue it much, at any rate.

He frowned, unwilling to dwell on that, instead entertaining the notion that maybe she just didn't understand the implications of their situation. Hadn't she run into this sort of thing when she traveled with the half-breed and the monk?

Sesshoumaru studiously ignored the strange swell of possessive irritation that arose at this thought.

Abruptly Kagome lifted her head and announced to the world: "Men suck!" before letting her chin fall back down to rest on her knees and resuming her pout.

Obviously she did not, he concluded with a tiny bit of satisfaction. Frowning a little, Sesshoumaru chose not to enlighten her as to the reason for this treatment as it would probably only upset her, and she would find out soon enough anyway, he was sure. And if she didn't... well, that was all the better. He could only afford periodic checks on her well-being at the shrine - seeing her safe and relatively lively had soothed him more than he cared to admit this afternoon, but he couldn't spend all his time watching her - and he didn't want to think about worrying over her safety amongst her own kind as well.

Sighing, the youkai lord lifted a hand to his head, slowly massaging a temple as he tried to coax his thoughts into some semblance of order.

Kagome glared at the flames as she attempted to find the energy in her to get ready for bed. Couldn't she just fall over right now and slip into unconsciousness? Couldn't she just get a little shut-eye before she began the horrible, onerous task of preparing to sleep?

No. I can do this, she thought. I set a bone today. It went crunch. If I can set a bone - crunch - then I can certainly handle standing up and taking a bath.

Crunch.

With a dreadful certainty, Kagome knew that she was going to have nightmares about this quest for the rest of her life. Sometimes she had dreams with Aiko the dragon, and she frequently had dreams of the last battle - except in her dreams, things went wrong - but she knew that it would be a long time before she would be able to sleep peacefully again.

In fact, she was probably going to have nightmares tonight, no doubt about crunching bones and squelching corpses and oozing wounds that were going to have to be cut away and god she was so glad this wasn't her career. She would have never made it in medical school. Could not set bones for a living.

Crunch.

She was going to hear that tonight, she was sure of it.

Dammit, she mentally groaned as she heaved herself to her feet. Damn, damn, dammit. Kagome leaned over and wrenched her bag open before she grabbed her pajamas, soap, washcloth, and shampoo. Tossing her towel over her shoulder, she turned to the youkai still sitting passively against his tree trunk.

"I'm going to go take a bath," she announced. "If I fall asleep and drown, tell Fuyu I never liked her."

Sesshoumaru raised an eyebrow. Then, to her surprise, he gracefully unfolded his body and rose to his feet.

"Lead the way," he said.

"Ah-haha," Kagome replied. No! she thought. Bad dog! Briefly she considered hitting him on the nose with a rolled-up newspaper, but the fact that he would not take kindly to that sort of treatment deterred her.

That, and she had no newspaper.

Sesshoumaru just stared at her, oblivious to her sudden desire for a copy of the Tokyo Times.

"You're being paranoid," she said finally.

"Simply because there was no threat this afternoon does not mean this state of affairs will continue. So lead the way," he replied blandly.

He seemed unfazed by her glowering. "Fine," she napped, "but you have to keep your back turned like you did this morning." Refusing to meet his answering smirk, she turned and stalked away, not looking back to see if he followed.

When they finally returned to their fire, Kagome found that her mood was worse than before. Cold baths coupled with constant glances over her shoulder in fits of paranoid modesty apparently tended to do that. Face scrunched in a cranky expression, she slammed her toiletries back in her backpack before stomping over to her sleeping bag and dragging it back to the

fire.

Sesshoumaru watched her as she shook it out and spread it on the ground. Groaning a little, Kagome lowered herself down to sit on top of it and, crossing her legs, she propped her elbows on her knees and buried her head in her hands.

His eyes narrowed as he studied her; she appeared to be thinking, which was never good.

Suddenly she sat up and looked at him.

"Teach me to fight," she said.

Sesshoumaru blinked. Then he chuckled.

Kagome liked it when he laughed - he looked relaxed and handsome, younger and kinder - but right now she wished he would just shut up. She liked it when he laughed, but she did not like it when he laughed at her.

"Hey!" she half-shouted, glaring at him. "This is serious! I have to learn to kick some ass or I, and by extension all of Edo, am screwed! Besides," she sniffed, "you're so freaked out about youkai attacks, you might as well make sure I know how to defend myself, right?"

He shook his head, still chuckling. His eyes were closed, mouth twisted in a sardonic smile. "Did we not already go through this a few days ago?"

"Well... yeah," she conceded. "I..."

She stole a glance at him, only to see him waiting patiently.

"I just really don't want to ask any of the men at the shrine. They're not very..." she trailed off. Civilized? Respectful? Sharp?

"...yeah," she finished lamely.

The youkai raised a brow. "I am certain you will find someone to teach you," he said. "I do regret that it cannot be me."

Color pricked her cheeks for some reason. She didn't know what to say to that. "Um... thanks," she mumbled.

It did not appear that he was going to say anything else so, with a sigh, she allowed herself to slump out of her defensive posture. It really was too bad - his hovering was starting to get on her nerves, but she would not have minded being with him a little more, even if he was kicking her ass during their quality time.

Oh, well. Kagome scooted over and knelt down next to the sleeping bag before she began to fluff it up a little. Maybe Fuyu has some suggestions. Though on second thought, she wasn't certain she trusted her slave-driving mentor to recommend a teacher who wouldn't accidentally kill her or slice off her nose. And Kagome liked her nose.

There was probably nothing for it, though. With resignation, she began to lower herself to the ground for some much-needed sleep.

"What are you doing?"

Kagome shot back up into a sitting position. "What?" she exclaimed, startled, before she processed what he had said. "Oh, I'm... um... getting ready for bed?"

The statement had come out as a question because Sesshoumaru had leveled a gaze at her so intense she was certain she was giving him the wrong answer.

"You are not sleeping there," he informed her.

She stared back at him for a long moment. "You're starting to scare me," she said quietly.

He blinked. "Good," he said. "Now come here."

* * *

It was noontime. If she'd had an instructor, she would have been able to escape. Unfortunately, it was impossible for her to solicit help from any of the

soldiers still recovering at the shrine while Fuyu had her under her thumb, and the sour old woman didn't seem inclined to think of this fact. There was nothing for it.

"Fuyu-sama?" she ventured nervously.

The old woman looked up sharply from the kettle of lunch-time rice she was cooking for herself and her assistant. "What the hell is it now, girl?"

Kagome was getting tired of being called girl, but she was in no position to complain about it. Gritting her teeth she shifted on her knees, trying to work a little more circulation into her calves which were no doubt turning blue underneath her red hakama. "I, um..." she said.

It was a bad start.

"Don't waste my time," Fuyu said. "Either have something to say, or don't open your mouth."

Scowling, Kagome snorted. "Sorry," she said. "I was just trying to think of how to phrase this."

"You're going to ask me for something, aren't you?" the miko said, stirring the pot in front of her.

Taken a little aback, Kagome blinked. "Er, yes," she said. "How did you know?"

"No one ever wants to think about how they word their compliments," Fuyu sniffed. "What is it you want?"

Did she just make a wry observation? Kagome wondered momentarily before she determined that it probably didn't matter. Shrugging, she decided to take the plunge.

"I need to take the afternoon off to find an instructor," she said bluntly. If her mentor valued candor, then, by god, she was going to be candid.

To her surprise, Fuyu did not immediately slap her down. Instead, she picked up her wooden spoon - which, thankfully, she was not using to stir their lunch

- and stuck it into her haori. After a few contortions she apparently found the spot she was looking for.

Kagome watched as the old woman scratched her armpit thoughtfully.

"So your youkai will not teach you?" she asked suddenly.

Taken aback, Kagome fumbled. "Um," she said, "he's not my youkai. And no. He said he didn't have the patience and that he might accidentally kill me."

"Mm," the miko said. "Wise."

Kagome looked away.

"So he's not your youkai," she continued, as if she were speculating about what color to paint her nails - what color best represents 'cold bitch'? turquoise? - rather than Kagome's relationship with her strange traveling companion. "Then are you his miko?"

"What?" Kagome exclaimed, rocking back on her heels in shock. "No! I mean, we don't... belong to each other. I told you, we're just allies."

The woman pinned her with a diamond-hard stare. "Is that so?"

Against her will, Kagome flushed, just a little. "We're... we're friends, too," she said faintly. Friend still didn't seem the right word, but she couldn't think of another that would fit without implying a number of suggestive falsehoods.

"Hm," the old miko said.

Kagome squirmed.

Then, as if she had suddenly forgotten all about the intensely personal question she had just asked, Fuyu leaned forward and began to scoop the rice from the pot she had been stirring into a couple of deep wooden bowls.

"Eat up," she said. "I have just the person for you."

Ten minutes later, Kagome was staring at the instructor Fuyu had chosen.

Fuyu introduced him, since he was incapable of doing so himself.

"Kagome," she said, "this is Kazuo. Wake up, you lazy lout!" This last bit was directed at the sleeping samurai on the ground. Kagome watched as the old miko gave him an ungentle kick in the ribs.

He groaned slightly in response, swatting ineffectively at the old miko's toes as though she were no more than a fly.

Incredulously, Kagome glanced at her mentor, who paid her no mind and gave the man another kick.

Apparently her chosen sensei was the drunk man who had argued so charmingly with Fuyu yesterday, and, distantly, Kagome wondered just what she had managed to get herself in to.

He looked to be in worse health today than he had yesterday. Would he be all right teaching her? She shuddered at the thought that he might exacerbate whatever illness he had contracted just to make sure she knew how to handle a sword.

"Fuyu-sama - " she began.

"Relax, girl," the miko cut her off. "He's usually sober in the afternoons."

"Uh," Kagome said, "that's not - "

Fuyu paid her no mind. "Wake up!" she barked again, leaning down and giving him a light slap across the face.

Kazuo turned over, his eyes cracking open groggily. When his gaze fell on Fuyu, he grinned devilishly.

"Time for a drink?" he asked.

"Up!" Fuyu demanded.

Kagome saw the man wince at the noise, but he dragged himself first into a sitting position and then to his feet. "Yes, miko-san?" he asked sardonically.

"You're to teach my assistant how to fight," Fuyu barked at him.

A frown crept onto the man's face. "Am I?" he asked.

"If you want to stay here," she said.

He's here by choice? Kagome wondered. Blinking, she tried to get a closer look at the man, attempting to discern whether or not he was injured, ill, or merely hung over.

The man noticed her scrutiny and grinned at her. "So," he said loudly, "you want to learn swordplay?"

There was a light chuckling around them, and Kagome felt her jaw tighten as she gritted her teeth. Dimly, she wondered where Sesshoumaru was, and if he were watching her humiliation. She fervently hoped not.

"Mind your manners!" Fuyu snapped at the man.

He raised his hands apologetically. "Sorry, sorry, miko-san," he said placatingly before turning back to Kagome. "What do you need to learn to fight for?" he asked abruptly. His eyes seemed to be fading in and out of focus, and Kagome finally concluded that he was, indeed, coming down from being drunk, obviously recovering from another session with the sake bottle.

Biting her lip, she decided to simply lay it all on the table. "I need to fight a sorceress," she told him. "She's cursed a village and I have to stop her."

The man raised his eyebrows. "Is that so?" He seemed amused. "And yet you are a novice fighter. So even though you are inexperienced and will likely fail, it's your job to do?"

She knew how it sounded, but he didn't have to be so rude about it. "Yes," she clipped. "It is."

He narrowed his eyes, but nodded after a moment's reflection. "Hm," he said, as though she had just imparted a great mystery to him.

Then, without preamble, he took a step toward her. He was very tall. Kagome scowled at him, refusing to take a step back even as he loomed.

"Think you're going to survive?" he asked suddenly.

From the corner of her eye, Kagome saw Fuyu turn to look at her sharply, as though waiting to see what her answer would be. She licked her lips.

"Not really," she said hoarsely.

"Ah," he said, nodding. "Pessimism. I like that."

Fuyu turned sharply toward him. "Doesn't matter what you like or not," she snapped at him. "She's you're responsibility. Every afternoon until she leaves."

Seemingly resigned, the samurai sighed and pulled back. Very deliberately he focused on her, his gaze sweeping up and down as though he were assessing a prize horse. Kagome squirmed.

"Well, girl," he finally said, suddenly sounding strong and sure of this new agreement. "I've only one question for you."

The sudden, light swell of hope in her chest swept over her, and she felt her face smooth out in relief. "Yes?" she asked expectantly, looking up at him with what she hoped was earnest receptivity.

He gave her one last appraising look. "Are you willing to work hard?" he asked, and his voice was so solemn that she couldn't help but feel the gravity of the situation.

"Yes, Kazuo-dono," she said respectfully, and gave him a quick but deep bow. When she straightened, she saw his lips curl at the edges.

"Oh, good," said Kazuo, and grinned. "At least that makes one of us."

and I couldn’t tell you, but I was wrong / chickened out, grabbed my pen and

my paper, sat down and I wrote this song: Yay, it's chapter 30! Finally... incidentally I'm not sure if anyone has noticed, but this story managed to get very popular in a fairly short amount of time. The hit count on FFnet reached over 100,000 hits back in... oh, the middle of April, or something like that. It's way over now, something like 138,000 hits, but we all know what such a hit count means: kiriban! Well, actually it was Suriyel's idea, as so many things are, but you know. If you don't know what kiriban is, it's sort of a thank you gift in the form of a drawing or a story for your loyal, lovely readers, so clearly, as I obviously had nothing better to do, I had to do one. Therefore in my profile on FFnet, a Single Spark, and Media Miner, you'll find a link to my little thank you gift for you all on devArt. It's a scene from this very chapter, actually. I'm not a great artist, but I hope you enjoy. This story wouldn't be such a success without all of you.

Onward! Once again, big, big thanks go to Technoelfie for her wonderful suggestions that helped make this chapter better. You're the best, luv!

And this chapter is dedicated to the effervescent quirkyslayer, who is a lovely artist and just wonderful to blither about Inuyasha to. Thanks for rocking my world muchly, darling!

Tales from the House of the Moon
by
Resmiranda

Chapter Thirty

"And I'm haunted
By the lives that I have loved
And actions I have hated.
And I, I'm haunted
By the promises I made
And others I have broken."
- Poe, "Haunted"

* * *

The very next day Kagome went from learning how to patch up holes in people in the morning to learning how to put those holes there in the first place in the afternoon.

The irony was not lost on her instructor.

"Now you can keep yourself in business," were Kazuo's words as Kagome shuffled nervously in front of him, feeling awkward and disjointed in her skin as she waited for her first real lesson in swordsmanship.

Kazuo had picked out a semi-secluded spot on the eastern side of the shrine, shored up against the string of tree-covered hills that curved south and further east instead of on the western side, which would have placed them next to the recently cleared battlefield. Kagome found herself grateful for this small favor, as she wasn't certain she would be able to concentrate on learning how to make corpses when there were so many corpses already made and conveniently located just in case she needed one. Why bother making more?

She watched her instructor anxiously as he leaned heavily against a tree and tried to appear alert, though the occasional wince told her he was nursing another hangover and was reluctant to emerge from the shade. Kagome stood ten feet away from him in the long, green grass, and sweated slightly in her haori.

She had suggested, when they had met at the foot of the shrine steps, that she change into lighter clothes for the duration of practice, but Kazuo had shaken his head, looking at her as though she were stupid.

"Are you going to fight in practice clothes, or in these?" he demanded, leisurely cleaning his teeth with a splintery twig he had picked up from somewhere.

"Um," she had answered, "I don't know..."

"Well, then," he replied, "you might as well get used to fighting like this." Then he grinned at her before turning his head to the side and hocking an impressive hunk of mucus into the warm grass beside her. He ignored the distasteful wrinkling of her nose.

Still, his personal habits aside, she had to admit that he had a very good point even though that admission only made her resentful.

She shouldn't have been angry that he spoke the truth. It made complete sense, of course, but the fact remained that she didn't want to train in haori and hakama; both articles of clothing were both so thick and so billowy that she was certain she was going to pass out from heat or dehydration before the day was over, and just thinking about fighting in them sent a stab of exasperation directly through her brain, which then promptly settled into a throbbing pain in her skull. It was bad enough that she had to wield a sword - she didn't want to feel like she was doing it whilst wearing a parachute as well.

Kazuo was unsympathetic. "At least you don't have to wear armor," he'd said idly as they walked to the patch of ground he had designated for her training. "All that extra protection would just be unwieldy."

"Thanks," she'd said sullenly. "That's... that's inspiring."

"Hey, really? I'm better at teaching than I thought," he said. He turned and tossed a grin over his shoulder. She refused to return it.

Now, shifting from foot to foot in front of him while he massaged his temples, Kagome felt intensely nervous. She'd taken some weapons classes, but now that she was standing in front of someone who was ostensibly a master of classic kenjutsu all her meager training seemed even more paltry. She was tempted, in fact, to pretend that she'd never handled a sword before just so she would feel mildly competent for the first day of instruction, but after a moment's reflection she rejected this idea; she only had a month, after all, so she might as well pick up where she left off no matter how humiliatingly insufficient her current training happened to be.

She watched as his middle and forefingers soothed little circles into his no-doubt aching skull, and she only barely kept herself from mirroring his action. The morning had been spent changing bandages, and the stink of wounds gone sour still curled in her lungs, twisting her stomach more than usual; the smell, coupled with the ever-increasing heat of the day, had inspired an insistent pain under her own skin that she was loath to acknowledge. She could only imagine asking to be excused from battle due to a headache.

Yeah, sorry, just need an aspirin good night's sleep, she thought. Hopefully I'll feel more like eviscerating people tomorrow.

Kagome frowned; the situation was getting rather more unpleasant than she had ever imagined.

Then again, what had she expected? Truth be told she wasn't terribly certain, but it definitely had not included wooden spoons, intestines, and a hungover sensei, and, now that she was thinking of it, her last quest had involved unanticipated intestines as well. Absently, she wondered if the universe was trying to tell her something.

Abruptly Kazuo pushed himself away from the tree, the quick movement causing Kagome to snap to attention. She watched as he blinked a few times before, quite suddenly, he seemed to shed his weariness and pain; his spine straightened, his eyes shone a little brighter, and he tucked his hands behind his back, his entire bearing clearly demonstrating that he was the master of his own body. Suddenly he looked less like a sick, washed-up man and more like the warrior he was supposed to be.

He looked a lot more intimidating. Kagome nearly took a step back but stopped herself just in time.

"Stop fidgeting," he said abruptly. "Let's see what you can do with that sword."

Nodding and biting her lip, Kagome let her hand fall on the hilt of the sword at her waist as she centered her upper body and placed her feet in position. The light twist of the hips to the front still felt a little awkward to her, but she forced herself to do it properly rather than fudge it as she usually did in classes when no one was watching.

Now she was the only student. She felt the strange, assessing weight of Kazuo's eyes on her.

Look bored, she thought. Think of nothing.

Sometimes it fell into place, just as it did when she aimed her bow, and Kagome felt her mind go a little fuzzy at the edges as she slipped into the swift,

sharp movements of the katas.

She heard the blade hiss against the sheath as she slid forward, drawing it out in a slash that would disembowel anyone unlucky enough to be standing next to her.

Slice, she thought.

Stab, turn, down -

It didn't take long for her to finish. Katas, after all, were the most basic of movements from which all attacks could be built, and she felt grateful that she at least knew those; she had not been able to internalize them yet, but it was a start. Pulling herself into a relaxed standing position, Kagome resheathed the sword and turned to the samurai still lingering in the shade.

He was looking at her strangely.

As the silence between them stretched out he seemed entirely disinclined to speak, and she wondered if he had been taking Make Kagome A Nervous Wreck lessons from Sesshoumaru.

Then his mouth twisted. "Is that it?" he asked.

Kagome flushed. "Yes," she snapped defiantly. "Is that a problem?"

"It's a crisis," he replied. "Good god."

Her hands curled into fists. "Well," she said snidely, "I guess you'll just have to make it into a minor disaster."

He was massaging his temples again. "How good is this sorceress you're going to be fighting?"

Kagome crossed her arms, suddenly feeling defensive. "I don't know," she said, bracing for an angry tirade. "Pretty damn good, considering she has supernatural help." And all I have are an old miko, a drunk samurai, and an emotionally-stunted youkai lord. I'm on a roll.

Strangely, however, this declaration seemed to have the opposite effect she had anticipated. "Oh, good," Kazuo said. "So we can safely assume you are going to get injured no matter what?"

Eeek, Kagome thought, suddenly feeling the need to release a bit of tension, even if only in her head. Out loud, she said, "Maybe."

"Let's just assume that you are and go from there. What weapons does she use?"

Kagome frowned. "A bo," she informed him. "And throwing knives."

The samurai scratched his chin thoughtfully. "A bo and throwing knives," he repeated. "This sounds tricky."

That seemed about the crux of it. "Pretty much," Kagome agreed.

Kazuo ignored her, pursing his lips. "So," he said slowly, "you're going to have to get close so she can't use those knives against you."

Eeeeek!

Oblivious to her inner primal-scream session, he continued as though thinking out loud to himself. "And she has godly help, which makes things even trickier. I'll bet she's, oh, ten times better than you and has excellent form." He gave her a look from the corner of his eye.

She wrinkled her nose, annoyed. "Well I haven't spent my life as some evil spirit's toy puppet," Kagome told him haughtily, feeling the need to stick up for herself. "That sort of cuts back on my ill-gotten superpowers, you know."

"Yes, yes," he waved the hand that had been rubbing through his three-day beard. "That's fine. You'll just have to fight as quick and dirty as possible. Luckily," he puffed out his chest, "I am the master of quick and dirty fighting."

"You don't look it," Kagome said dubiously.

"I've been ill," he replied. "But trust me: I'm incredible."

Intensely aware that she really had no choice in the matter, she nevertheless gave it a valiant go. "I'm not really comfortable fighting dirty," she informed him, sliding her eyes away from his. "It just seems... you know, unfair."

"I'm sorry, do you have a god that you can pull out of your pretty little ass?" Kazuo wanted to know. "Because that would be a great trick."

Kagome scowled at him. "Don't be so crude." Soldiers, she thought with irritation.

Kazuo just grinned at her. "Very well," he said. "Ready?"

The way he was smiling set her teeth on edge. "For what?"

"Keep your hand on your sword," he said, "and follow me." Almost as an afterthought, he added, "And try not to break an ankle."

Then he whirled away from her and took off across the field.

Kagome heard a quick gasp escape her own mouth -

" - ah - !"

- but her feet had already processed his command, and she felt her sandals bite into the tender grass beneath her as she dug in and raced after him.

It was a lot harder than it looked; Kazuo was fast, and he darted from side to side. At first she had tried cutting through his zig-zagging path, but the moment he glanced over his shoulder to find her taking a shortcut he had yelled at her to follow him exactly.

"You don't want to get hit with knives, right?" he'd shouted back to her, his voice almost lost in the wind and severely muffled by his shoulder. Just like Sesshoumaru - and Inuyasha, and Miroku, and probably all other classically trained warriors - he leaned forward, keeping his sword arm in front of him as though running into a stiff wind even when his feet were cutting a diagonal over the ground.

When she strove to trace his steps she found that she was hopelessly slow

until she copied his posture. It was incredibly difficult to keep her balance as she always felt like she was about to pitch forwards and end up face down in the dandelions, but that was probably part of the secret; it appeared that the sprint was just a fall, delayed indefinitely.

She was still slow as hell, though, and more out-of-shape than she had thought, her cross-country trek and two-day journey to the shrine notwithstanding. It had been a long, long time since she had been forced to run for an extended period without the benefit of adrenaline, and she was out of breath within minutes. Kazuo stood at the far end of the field - it was probably five hundred meters between the hill and the forest opposite - and smirked at her as she struggled to retrace his footsteps.

When she finally came to a stop in front of him, sweat pouring down her face, he was shaking his head.

"I think I killed you twenty-two times," he said, "but I might have lost count."

Kagome just panted, lifting her arms and letting her sleeves fall down past her elbows, seeking ventilation and ignoring the dubious look he cast at her rather meager biceps.

He let her rest for almost a full minute.

"Ready?" he said as she was in the middle of pulling her haori away from the damp skin of her stomach, and he was already ten meters away when she gathered her wits enough to say, rather faintly, "...what?"

"Keep up!" he yelled. "Keep your hand on your sword!"

Jolting into action, Kagome wondered how long she would last if she tried to kill him after she caught up.

She chased him across the field for an hour, pausing after each lap for her to gulp some water and take a quick sixty second break before starting out again; when he finally told her to take a longer break she didn't even bother to thank him, merely dropped where she stood, first to her hands and knees, and then to her stomach.

With great interest, Kagome watched a line of ants march in front of her nose while Kazuo poked her with his toe.

"Go, go," he urged her. "Have a walk. Go to the stream or something. Your muscles will seize up if you don't move around."

"But then you wouldn't be able to make me run any more," she said petulantly into the ground, not caring that she was probably smearing dirt all over her face.

"No," he said, and she could hear the leer in his voice, "then I'll just be able to do what I want with you."

A brief, soothing vision of Sesshoumaru casually melting Kazuo's face off flashed across her mind, but after this indulgence she reluctantly pushed it from her mind on the grounds that she would be forced to find another teacher, and that would just waste time that she didn't have. Stiffly, she climbed to her feet and stumbled into the trees.

She returned twenty minutes later, sleeves pushed onto her shoulders and the hems of her hakama tucked into her obi to expose her skin to the air, and sloshing slightly with each tottering step.

"Clever," Kazuo said when she came to a stumbling stop in front of him. "You know if you run now, you'll get sick."

Crap, she thought. "Sorry," Kagome replied almost sheepishly. "I wasn't thinking about that. I was just thirsty."

He appeared to ponder this revelation for a long moment. "All right, no more running today," he told her finally, "but you'll start again tomorrow, so be prepared."

The wave of relief that hit her was so powerful her knees buckled for the briefest of moments before she caught herself. "Thank you, Kazuo-dono," she replied fervently, lowering herself with rather more dignity than falling before placing her hands on the ground and bowing deeply.

When she climbed rather stiffly to her feet the samurai was looking pleased

with himself, as though impressed with his own mercy. She smiled at him on the grounds that it payed to keep him happy. "What next, Kazuo-dono?" she asked brightly.

He jumped, very slightly, and for a strange moment he looked shocked, as if he had expected her to vanish in a puff of gratitude and was surprised to still find her standing in front of him. Then the expression vanished from his face and he smiled at her with that strange, devilish smile that seemed so carefree and so ironically jaded at the same time. His grin was so dazzling it was almost unnatural to see it peeking out between his lips; his pearly white dew-drop teeth were such a striking contrast to the dark purple bruises that bloomed beneath his eyes and the sickly, lined pallor of his face that the sight seemed almost grotesque, and Kagome found herself glad that he didn't smile very often.

She must have been staring because his face fell within moments and he looked at her with a nearly blank face, though his eyes shone almost resentfully. Kagome fought to keep her eyes on his features.

Without warning he whipped around and began to stalk across the field, though this time he merely walked, and his back bowed, shoulders slumping so subtly that, had she not spent so much time attempting to decipher the moods of a certain poker-faced youkai lord, she would have missed it completely. With a sinking feeling in her stomach, Kagome followed him.

Kazuo didn't say anything to her, though. The moment they reached the edge of the trees on the other side of the field - Kazuo rather sooner than Kagome, who felt so stiff and tired she was certain she might never walk properly again - he turned to her and gave her an appraising look. Kagome stood in front of him and nervously allowed him to size her up.

"Right," he said after a moment, "put your hand on the hilt of your sword."

Uncomfortably she shifted from one foot to the other. "I thought we weren't doing any more running today?"

"Oh, we aren't. We are merely practicing sword work."

Unconsciously she gave a sigh of relief; she had been unreasonably paralyzed

by the thought that her small moment of gaping at him - which had been, at the very least, terribly impolite - had bought her another hour of zig-zagging across the summer field.

"Don't get too comfortable," Kazuo said sharply. "Practice unsheathing the sword so the blade faces outwards. The element of surprise is going to be one of your only assets, so you have to get this right the first time."

"What am I going to be doing, exactly?"

He gave her a look of intense impatience. "That is not important right now. The important thing is speed and perfection. Even if you don't get anything else right - " he raised an eyebrow - "and you probably won't - this will be your best chance. So shut up and draw."

For a second Kagome almost snapped at him, but she reined herself in.

If this is going to be one of my only chances, she thought, then I have to do my best. I have to get it right.

Her features hardened and she planted her feet firmly beneath her. She let her eyes close slightly, striving to feel the connection with the ground; in the end, that would be what would give her the extra power she needed to draw the sword with the force necessary. Left hand wrapping around the scabbard, she felt her thumb wedge itself between the wood and the metal of the tsuba; her hand tensed and she pushed.

The tiny tsinkt of the wakazashi slipping out cracked like the sound of waking up.

And then Kagome whipped the blade from the sheath, lunging forward and dragging the edge against an imaginary body. She didn't want to think about how that would really feel.

"Terrible," Kazuo said, causing her to look at him in surprise. "Again."

Awkwardly she slipped it back into the scabbard and recentered.

This time when she lunged forward, she felt the blade leaping free. Was that

supposed to happen? Unsure of herself she glanced at Kazuo, who had seated himself beneath a tree fifteen feet away.

To her chagrin, he was taking a pull from a sake bottle. "Where did you get that?" she demanded, letting her sword droop until it bumped against her leg.

The samurai shrugged. "Secret," he grunted. "Again. You know what's supposed to happen, now make it happen."

"What is supposed to happen?" she wanted to know, deciding to ignore the alcohol for now.

"Full control," he said, waving the sake bottle vaguely in the air as though to make a point. "The sword is an extension of you, and you're letting it go wild. It jerks out of the sheath. You're failing to keep the strike smooth and the blade waves all over the place."

Kagome was beginning to feel intensely stupid, and she wondered exactly why she had bothered to take all those classes when she could have spent all that time doing something that would have served her just as well, like picking her nose. She wanted her money back.

Beneath his tree, Kazuo shifted, draining the sake from the bottle, and Kagome watched with a strangely horrified fascination as he lifted his hand to the tree just above his head. Her eyes widened as his hand disappeared into a well concealed hollow. When he drew it back out, it was clutching another bottle.

She felt almost hypnotized until he spoke. "Come on," he said. "You haven't got time to gape. Again." He pinned her with a bizarrely lucid gaze from the corner of his eye. "Repeat that action until I say stop. Make it smooth."

Nodding, Kagome lifted her chin and slipped the blade back into the scabbard.

Concentrate, she thought.

Kagome focused, and struck.

* * *

Sesshoumaru was not thinking about the way Kagome's arms draped around his neck, nor the way her soft breath ghosted over his throat, nor the way her legs clung to his waist, nor even the way the firm, posterior curve of her thighs shifted beneath his fingers.

Nope. He was definitely not thinking about those things at all, because he had far more pressing problems with which to occupy his mind, such as counting backwards from one hundred.

Unfortunately Kagome kept foiling this very delicate mental operation by shifting her position whenever he was somewhere between seventy-five and sixty, which caused him to lose count and subsequently forced him to start all over again. The entire endeavor was so frustrating in so many ways that he was very close to dropping her on the ground and dragging her for the rest of the way by her feet. Of course, she would not be happy about that course of action and would definitely inform him of that fact loudly and repeatedly, but she would survive even if his sanity did not.

"Sesshoumaru?"

Sixty-seven, he thought with determination. Sixty-six... sixty-five... sixty-four... sixty-three...

Kagome wiggled.

Sixty... sixty-three... sixty-two...

"Hey, Sesshoumaru..." she mumbled again. He could almost feel her lips on his neck.

Sesshoumaru gave up. "Yes?" he bit out curtly.

She did not seem to register his discontent. "Slow down," she told him sleepily. "Your armor is really uncomfortable for passengers."

Sighing, he slightly adjusted his grip and leaned forward a little so that she could nestle more comfortably against his back. He hadn't carried her like this since she had left over a year and a half ago – and, in the more secret recesses

of his mind Sesshoumaru had to admit that he had missed doing so - but somehow he didn't remember this activity being nearly so distracting.

On his back and oblivious to his disconcerted musings concerning their position, Kagome was feeling very unhappy about the fact that every muscle in her body hurt and that this kept her from enjoying, on an embarrassingly perverted but highly delicious level, the particularly delightful way that her legs were wrapped around Sesshoumaru's hips. Kagome was not accustomed to being so sensually aware of her own body – nor the bodies of others for that matter – and normally she would have been wary and a little frightened of her own attraction to him. However, there was still a little, almost-innocent illicit thrill to be had from it, and as this was probably the closest she would ever get to achieving actual eroticism with Sesshoumaru she felt that it was entirely safe to appreciate it on whatever level she could.

Unfortunately not even the youkai lord's usual grace cushioned his footsteps enough to spare her from the slight jolt of his shoes as he strolled through the trees, and that alone did a very thorough job of driving all sensuous feeling from her limbs.

On the other hand at least she was not propelling herself under her own power, as she probably would have fallen asleep halfway to the forest and spent the night in the field with all the beetles and snakes and other highly unpleasant creatures had Sesshoumaru not been so fussy about her. She'd felt his youki swell and ebb all day as she trained, rising or falling depending on whether he was approaching or retreating from her position, until he had created a circle of sine waves around her. He was just like a broody mother hen with her wayward chick. Still, she was grateful, since he had descended from the sky in the graceful way that chickens didn't and wondered out loud what the hell she thought she was doing with her head in a pile of rabbit poop.

"In my time this is considered to be one of the best hair treatments," Kagome lied, too tired to blush but not to be embarrassed.

"I had no idea you came from so far back," he had replied. She watched wearily as he tilted his head to the side and appeared to consider her. "Are you going to sit up and brush yourself off?" he finally asked.

"I don't know," she snapped, "are you going to carry me back if I do?"

"Were I you, I would try it and find out."

She did, and he did. Kagome found herself too tired to really do much to thank him except attempt to tighten her arms, but her limbs were as strong as noodles and Sesshoumaru wasn't good at the whole hugging thing so she suspected that he might have missed it.

Didn't matter, she decided as the trees broke and the clearing that housed their campsite swept in to meet them. Sesshoumaru strolled to where the blackened skeleton of their fire sat, and began to lower himself to one knee in order to allow her to fall off his back as gently as possible.

"Nng, wait," Kagome mumbled. "I need a bath."

Sesshoumaru, who had finally reached 'fifty-three,' abruptly lost count again.

He was silent for a moment as he tried to phrase his question properly in his mind. "Are you suggesting," he said after a moment, trying to keep his imagination as blank as possible, "that I bathe you?"

He earned a half-hearted smack on the shoulder for that question, which he thought was rather unfair. "Don't be a pervert," muttered his passenger. "I've got my backpack already. Just carry me to the stream."

One of her hands lifted from where it clung to his chest - Sesshoumaru tried not to be displeased about that and failed - and from the corner of his eye Sesshoumaru saw her wave it in the direction of the water, just in case he had forgotten where it was.

For a moment he considered refusing to be her pack horse, but he just could not form the words. With a mental sigh he turned in the direction of the stream and began to walk.

Kagome thought she might have fallen asleep on his back, because when he set her down she felt as though she had suddenly been jerked out of a very pleasant

dream which might have been about having her very own youkai carrier service. Still, he'd done what she'd wanted, so it was bath time. She couldn't wait to get the grime off her body and rid her hair of its inadvertent special treatment.

His boots were shifting lightly on the grass as he walked into the trees to give her privacy. Yawning a thank you at him, Kagome turned to her backpack and began the arduous task of moving her limbs, searching through the depths and wincing whenever she brushed a blistered hand against something, which was all the time. Distantly she wondered if she was going to be able to move at all tomorrow, and if she would even be able to use her hands.

For once she was glad that the stream was cold; by the time she'd finished her hands were so numb that she couldn't decide if they were going to fall off first from abuse or from cold. It was like a race - what would get her first? Maybe Sesshoumaru would make a bet with her. The odds favored abuse. Kagome entertained herself with calculating the probability of each outcome as she stumbled back through the trees to camp.

When she got there, she found Sesshoumaru stripped of his armor, legs folded beneath him, and poking the fire with his bare hands. His arms were bare, too, sleeves pulled back to reveal his striped wrists and well-formed muscles, and he wore such a surprisingly inward look of concentration on his face that Kagome was taken aback. She stood at the edge of the clearing and stared at him, wondering what sort of pod-person had replaced her companion.

"It's impolite to lurk," Sesshoumaru said. Long tapered fingers reached into the fire again, then grabbed something nestled in the heart of the flames and flipped it over before retreating again.

No, Kagome thought, that's definitely him.

She stumbled into the circle of light, dragging her backpack behind her. "I don't know if you're the best person to give a lecture in manners," she said dubiously.

"Are you perhaps implying that I am less than courteous?" he wanted to know.

For half a second Kagome wondered just how dense he really was until she saw

him studying her from the corner of his eye and realized that he was teasing her. The teasing gleam and the dangerous glint were very similar, of course. It wasn't surprising that she'd almost missed it.

"And if I was?" she said, drawing up beside him.

One of his eyebrows twitched in amusement. "Then it makes no difference," he told her. "Even if I am not courteous myself I know it when I see it."

"Oh, really?" she asked, letting her backpack fall from her sore fingers. The numbness had regrettably worn off. "How do you know that?"

"One does not need to be a warrior to determine terrible technique. The blood gives it away. Sit down."

He changed subjects too quickly, and Kagome barely had time to think about his sudden command before she found that she was lowering herself to the ground. She would have complained about his arrogance, but she found she quite liked the idea of sitting down, so she let it slide. Just this once.

Of course, given the current condition of her body, this took almost a full minute and required some very strange contortions that left her wishing that she hadn't changed into her pajamas just yet - it wasn't beyond the realm of imagination that Sesshoumaru might be able to peek down the front of her shirt as she settled herself rather gingerly.

Not that he would do something like that, of course. He was very direct; if he wanted a look at her he'd probably just remove her clothes himself.

Kagome felt her eyes glaze over just a bit at this mental image as her breath caught a little in her throat.

Yes... she said to herself, very carefully. That was a very bad thought. We should probably not think it again. Nervously she shot a glance in his direction, paranoia spiking to alarmingly high levels.

He was staring at her.

Kagome squirmed and looked away.

The blush was thundering up her throat and across her face. Sesshoumaru watched with interest as she nervously chewed on her lip and shifted where she sat. It was fascinating, as each movement caused her pain, which caused her to wince, which caused her to chomp down a little harder on her lip, which at last caused her to squirm with discomfort, thus starting the process over again.

Briefly he wondered what was making her so embarrassed before deciding that he didn't want to know. The less he knew about the inner workings of her mind, the better, since it would probably only confuse him in more ways than one, and she perplexed him enough already. Causing him confusion seemed to be her favorite hobby.

It was best to get this over with.

Kagome was studying a leaf with intense scrutiny. It wasn't nearly as interesting as she was pretending it was, so the sound of something heavy hitting the ground and the light movements flashing in her peripheral vision were more than enough to cause her to turn around and look at him as her curiosity got the better of her.

Sesshoumaru was nonchalantly reaching into the flame - just how indestructible was he, anyway? she couldn't believe some of the things he'd managed to survive - and when he withdrew his hands again he held in each of them a small, smooth stone. They were just like the stones at the bottom of the stream, worn down into perfect little ovals. Carelessly he tossed them aside before reaching into the fire again and repeating his actions.

After about ten or twelve stones he seemed to be finished. Without moving he let his hands rest against his lap and he turned his face toward her.

"Don't look so shocked," he said mildly. "Do you have any bandages?"

Belatedly Kagome realized that her mouth was hanging open, aghast at what he had been doing. "Oh, my god," she blurted. "Yes, just a minute, don't move - "

Her hands were on her backpack, and then her backpack wasn't there anymore. The thumb and forefinger of her right hand pinched at the air for a moment before she realized that there was no zipper because it had disappeared.

Whipping back around, she saw him shifting and turning toward her, her backpack in his hands.

"Sesshoumaru!" she said. "I would have found them for you! Don't touch anything if your hands are burned. I'll go get some water from the stream, wait here - "

He was looking at her strangely. "These are not for me," he said. She watched as he unfolded one hand toward her, revealing the unblemished palm.

This was all getting a little too weird for Kagome. She blinked at his hand as he used it to open her backpack himself and rummage around inside. Automatically she hoped he wouldn't find anything terribly embarrassing in there, but it didn't seem to matter; within seconds he'd found the white first aid box and set it on the ground before opening it. He poked experimentally at the creams arrayed inside before looking back to her, slightly helplessly.

Shaking herself, she frowned. "What are you looking for?" she said, deciding just to go with whatever he had in mind. He probably had a good reason for roasting rocks in the fire before pawing through her things.

"Your blisters," he said.

Kagome blinked, eyes glancing down to her own fingers. "Um. They're on my hands. What about them?" she asked blankly before glancing up just in time to catch him rolling his eyes.

"Yes, I know," he agreed patiently. "I meant something to heal them."

Realization was slowly dawning. "Oh," she said, as though he had just imparted a great truth that she would forget in the next five minutes. "Um. The pink and white tube is antibacterial anaesthetic?"

He looked at her for another long and calculating moment before he gave the

tiniest of shrugs and selected both the medicine she had indicated and the greatly diminished roll of bandages. She watched as he uncapped the tube of ointment and unrolled the long, white fabric. Then, turning back to her, he reached out, drew her hands into the space between them, and squeezed a generous amount of cream into her palms.

Gently, he began to massage her broken, weeping hands in his own as he rubbed the medicine into her wounds before he began to wrap her hands in clean, white strips.

Kagome suddenly felt even dizzier. Blinking, she wavered slightly where she sat, and tried to sort through the chaos in her head.

"Uh... what are you doing?" she asked fuzzily.

"Ensuring that you will be able to train tomorrow," Sesshoumaru replied, though his voice sounded even more clipped than usual. "Consider this as a safeguard on the amount of time I have invested in you."

Oh, she thought. "Er. Thank you."

Sesshoumaru didn't reply, merely finished looping the cloth over her fingers and dropped her hands, trying to ignore the way her breath was hitching in her suddenly fascinating chest that he most certainly was not going to look at.

Damn her delightfully skimpy clothes. The perk benefits of this journey were definitely becoming a little more distracting than he had anticipated, and not for the first time Sesshoumaru wondered if he had not been just the slightest bit dishonest with himself concerning his motivations for accompanying her. Quickly he shut down this line of thinking on the grounds that too much thought tended to be even more distracting and dangerous. Slowly, Sesshoumaru turned and gathered the small pile of hot stones before he stood up and thoughtfully strolled to the spot beneath the tree where they slept.

"Come," he commanded her absently.

She had been flexing her fingers experimentally in a small daze, but at the sound

of his voice Kagome jerked herself out of the vague pink soup her brain always seemed to float in whenever she grew too tired.

"Uh," she replied intelligently, but her body was more up-to-date on current events than her brain, so she pushed herself to her feet as best she could without using her hands and trotted over to him. "What's going on?" she asked as he sat down as regally as possible. It was quite fascinating how he could make even the act of plopping down in the dirt seem regal. It seemed a very impressive if rather useless talent.

He nodded to the spot next to him, rather regally. "On your stomach," he said.

Kagome looked down at her sleeping bag, still in the same spot as last night. "Er..."

She was being reticent. Sesshoumaru sighed. "The sooner you do so," he said, "the sooner you may sleep. Do you have a blanket?"

"In my bag," she replied mistily, already lowering herself to her knees.

She was finally on her stomach against the slippery waterproof material of her sleeping bag when he returned - the aches and pains really were rather bothersome when it came to things like moving - and could feel her eyes fighting to slide shut and drop her off into dreamland so they could get some proper rest. Valiantly she fought to keep them open. Any vaguely titillating thoughts she might have been entertaining vis a vis her relationship with the youkai lord that she rather fancied seemed to have vanished, slipping away and hiding inside her utter exhaustion.

Her eyes had gone all funny as well; everything seemed too sharp, or blurry, or something. Black leather boots and white silk hakama filled her vision.

"Do not fall asleep yet," she heard him say. She nodded, uncertain she would be able to form anything recognizing words any longer. She was just too sleepy...

Her hearing was strange, too. She heard him sit down next to her, and the sound was far sharper and louder than the rustle of silk should have been. There was a

tickling sensation as the blanket settled over her.

"What're you doing?" she muttered against her sleeping bag, her face pillowed on her hands folded under her temple.

"Fixing you," he said, and then, very gently, she felt the backs of his fingers rest against a muscle in her back that throbbed with pain before they slid away, leaving a hot weight in their place.

The stones, she thought. He's giving me a damn hot stone massage.

Kagome opened her mouth to laugh, but yawned instead as the warmth spread out across her skin.

He set another stone against her back.

"Where'd you learn this?" she demanded muzzily.

The soft rustle of his movements paused for a moment before resuming. He placed another hot stone over the swell of muscle shored up against her spine.

"I learned it..." he said softly, before falling silent. She waited for him to catch up with himself while he laid another stone down.

"Izayoi," he said finally. "Inuyasha's mother."

The warmth spreading over her was making it hard to work her mouth. "Why?" she managed.

For a moment he was silent again. Kagome could hear the crackling of the fire at the edge of her hearing, sparking against the night. Her eyes were closed, and she did not remember allowing herself to shut them.

"I watched her do this to Inuyasha," he said finally. "I was... not as gentle as I could have been in his training."

I knew it, Kagome wanted to say. I knew you were the one who taught him how

to fight. But she didn't want to make a big deal out of it - it might embarrass him, or upset him, and she was too tired. So all she said was, "Mm. Okay."

At the soft sound of her voice Sesshoumaru paused once more, the feeling of iron bands of muscle in his shoulders curling tight over one another, tense at the direction of this conversation and knowing where it was headed. It was unnerving to find that he was unbearably reluctant to tell her of these things, and yet a part of him was just waiting for the chance to do so. Yet she didn't seem inclined to pursue this any further - tonight, at least - and now he could not decide if he felt happy or disappointed at this unexpected reprieve. Maybe later they would speak...

It was not hard to remember how to do this, though. In his mind's eye, the soft white hands of Izayoi - wrapped in protective cloth - picked up warm stones and laid them over the bright red haori of her young son. She never said anything reproachful to her son's half-brother who pushed him so hard, either. Maybe she, too, understood the necessity of making him hard and tough, though she never could resist lifting the tears from her little boy's face with the hem of her kimono sleeves. And when the boy's training progressed and he finally stopped shedding any tears at all, especially in front of his older brother, she would dab gently at his dry cheeks anyway.

Sesshoumaru looked down at his own kimono sleeves, and for the briefest of moments he had to repress the urge to brush his fingers over her face, had to stop himself from trying to catch the tears that weren't there.

Instead he continued his task, letting the warmth soak into her tortured body.

There were only two stones left when she shifted again, and, almost asleep, she muttered something softly; had he not been youkai, he would not have heard it.

"You didn't tell me how your day was," Kagome mumbled, her voice fuzzy with sleep.

Hand in midair, his movement hitched very slightly as he continued to lower the stone carefully, blinking. "No," he agreed. "I did not."

The corners of her lips turned up gently. "So... tell me," she sighed. "I hope it was a good one."

Almost shocked at the strange question, Sesshoumaru merely finished his work - eventually when she turned in her sleep the weights, hopefully cooled by then, would tip off harmlessly onto the ground - and sat back, looking at her.

She looked almost peaceful. Much more peaceful than someone in her amount of pain should have looked, at least. Black eyelashes feathered against high, smooth cheeks; her brow remained unwrinkled, her hair fell softly over her shoulders, and she seemed entirely unconcerned with the dangers and trials that faced her.

Very slowly his arm rose, as if of its own accord, and he stretched his fingers out, across the void between them, to catch a lock of hair. He let it glide over his skin for a moment, almost hypnotized by his own actions, before letting it fall. Then he leaned back quickly, as though just realizing what he was doing.

She did not stir. He could still smell the faint, metallic smell of youkai blood that clung to his hair and clothes, all the blood he'd shed just for her. He'd shed a lot today. He'd shed more tomorrow.

"Fine," he murmured to the darkness, to the leaping flames, to his strange memories of stones and fire-rat fur, to no one at all. "It was a fine day."

* * *

There was a clash of metal as Kazuo's katana slid down the sharp edge of her wakazashi, and at the feel of the slice of his blade through the air, centimeters away from her billowing clothes, Kagome twirled on her toes and darted away, the trembling of her limbs barely registering above the sound of her heart pounding in her ears.

Her arms burned. Her legs burned. Her lungs burned.

Stepslideshift - RUN -

The thoughts flashed through her mind like slippery silver fish, glowing as the light hit them and then disappearing again as they twisted and zipped into the shadows, leaving only the lightest of impressions that they had ever been there at all.

And that was fine. Thinking too much could get you into trouble. Then again, thinking too little could get you into trouble, too. Thinking that you might be thinking too much or too little would definitely get you into trouble. She'd been in a lot of trouble because she couldn't stop thinking about her body or her position, and then because she couldn't stop thinking about thinking about those things.

Theoretically, of course, the world should fade the way it did when she shot an arrow or did her katas, but in practice things seemed to get a little bit trickier. Apparently it was a lot harder to feel Universal Oneness and Tranquility when one was being attacked by a grinning, six-foot-four samurai wielding a live blade. And Kazuo grinned quite a bit. She had yet to figure out why.

Not that she was thinking about those things at all right now, because she was currently honing her survival skills, which meant staying light on her feet and allowing only enough brain activity to remind her of what she really should be doing, like stepping in rather than instinctively flinching away, or darting left against a right-handed opponent and getting behind the range of their weapon instead of intuitively - and, it turned out, stupidly - beyond it.

It was all rather difficult, and right now the long grass wasn't helping her run, though she was definitely not thinking about that. On the other hand, she could hear Kazuo coming through the dry, rustling sea right behind her - use everything, he had told her, always know what's going on - so she knew when to dart and generally which way she should go, if her own heavy breathing and sharp footfalls didn't drown him out.

It was ten days since her first training session, and she had become good at dodging. She had to, partly because while Kazuo was very, very good, even while hungover, he was still using a damn sharp sword that had probably cut men in half who had been twice her size. Really, though, that was only part of the reason; mostly she'd become good at dodging because that was what Kazuo had made her practice the most. He seemed to feel that she had a talent for it, or, at the

very least, should develop a talent for it very quickly.

"I'll bet by the end of the month your fighting technique will still be shit, but you'll be good at running off," had been his precise words after their second training session. They'd spent two hours darting back and forth across the field, and, at the very end of their run, he had turned on her with his sheathed sword. Kagome had moved entirely on instinct, and, entirely by luck, had dodged it neatly.

She'd been miffed after his words had sunk in. "Why's that?" she demanded. "What makes you think I won't be good at fighting?"

Very lazily, Kazuo had picked his teeth with a splinter of wood. Like sake, he seemed to have an endless supply of splinters. "You still just stand there, waiting for someone to jump in. You're used to it, I'd wager. It'll take a lot more training than we have time for to get you on your toes."

That had stung, but had been so annoyingly true, too. She'd sniffed at him, trying to cover her hurt feelings. "What if I'm very bad at running away?" she demanded.

"Then you'll be very dead," he replied, "so we can only hope you're good at it."

"I thought you were teaching me to fight?" Kagome had demanded, trying to suppress the frustration in her voice.

Kazuo had shrugged at her rather laconically. "Running away is part of fighting," he intoned, sounding downright diplomatic for a change. "After all, you might stay alive long enough to inflict some damage if you keep running until the right moment."

It made sense, she had to admit. How did that phrase go? Run away, and live to fight another day? Or was it run away and live to run away another day? For some reason, the latter was seeming more and more appealing as her training progressed. Kagome was finding out that she didn't really like fighting at all.

In fact, she liked it even less than she had anticipated, and that made getting in the mood to train even more difficult. The sound of metal on metal hurt her teeth,

her hands were coarse ghosts of their former selves, it was hot, and Kazuo was unpredictable, constantly vacillating between serious sensei and grinning, insolent jerk who didn't really care if she lived or died.

Still, as always, getting attacked did a lot to banish her hatred of fighting, since the fear tended to shove any self-indulgent whining straight out the back door of her brain.

And, well... There was at least one perk: the fact that Sesshoumaru never failed to make her feel better with warm river stones and quiet conversation when she got back to camp in the evenings. It was almost worth it to feel like worthless crap all day just so she could feel the relief of being herself with him at night.

Behind her was the tell-tale slip of a foot against the grass - it sounded like snake scales rustling over each other - and her brain screamed at her to dart to the right, so she did, feeling her shoes bite into the earth beneath her. Kagome didn't really like to analyze why her brain told her such things - it was wiser just to do what the hell it told her to do and then figure it out later - but this time she knew just what was happening.

She couldn't tell what foot Kazuo was lunging forward with, but he was right-handed so there was a better chance of him attacking her from the right. If she moved forward and into his attack - except she would be beyond his range, so she would be out of his reach and behind his blade - she could turn and bring her blade out and DOWN -

Kagome knew better than to think she would hit him, and he didn't disappoint her. He also whirled neatly away and blocked her easily and then -

- attacked, and lunged -

- and she was lucky he was such a good teacher, because she was already running away. She was fighting dirty by not fighting at all, not giving an opening or taking any real risks. She was doing her best to draw her opponent out and make him tired, make him make that one fatal mistake. In a true samurai duel between two master swordsmen, there would be one move. Just one cut, and the whole thing would be over. But she wasn't a master swordsman, and it was likely the

madoushi wasn't either, so this would be a real duel and not a "true" one, and the reality was that she needed to win, not become a master or keep her form perfect, or anything like that. All she needed to do was stay uninjured for as long as possible.

Endurance and surprise, Kazuo told her, over and over. Endurance and surprise were her weapons. They might not be the most elegant or cultured or artful weapons, but they would serve her best in a real battle, and she need not bother herself too much with all that other stuff. After all, being a living swordsman who fought realistically was far more preferable to being a dead swordsman who had fought truthfully.

Kagome was learning that reality was almost always a lot grimier and dirtier than truth. She'd learned this lesson before, of course, but for some strange reason it seemed a bit more immediate this time around.

She was definitely running out of breath, though they had been at this for nearly an hour, so her endurance had improved quite a bit, she supposed. Whether or not it would be enough to save her skin was another matter entirely, and one which she felt almost entirely disinclined to think about even though she thought about it all the time in the back of her head. Just the suggestion of running into battle the way she was now was enough to drain the blood from her face and cause her heart to collapse into a singularity of panic.

Then again, she was getting pretty good at dodging those feelings as well as dodging blades; the principle was the same, at any rate. Redirect, refocus, and stay alert for ambushes.

Ambushes were the worst - she'd been sick this morning for the second day in a row because she just couldn't shut her stupid brain off long enough for a good night's rest. Kagome had tried explaining patiently to her internal organs that twisting themselves up into knots was bad for everyone and probably, in fact, decreased the likelihood of all of them escaping intact, but that little pep talk oddly made her feel worse.

Taking great, burning gulps of air, Kagome tried not to wince at the jolting of the impact of her feet against the ground - each harsh stop against the earth jiggled

sensitive bits like her stomach - and tried to listen.

He was still behind her, but now that she concentrated she could hear him panting nearly heavily as she, indicating that the high afternoon sun was taking its toll on him as well.

With difficulty Kagome wriggled her dry tongue around in her mouth, trying to work up enough saliva to make a noise.

"Ka - Kazuo-dono - " she panted.

Behind her there was a strange noise, as if Kazuo had just swallowed a bug. "You want to stop?" he demanded. She could tell he was trying to keep his voice as level as possible, but there was too much air in his words. There was the briefest of pauses before she heard him give a very wheezy laugh and his footsteps slowed. On the not-unreasonable suspicion that he might try to attack her just to "keep her on her toes" as he liked to say, Kagome kept running for another ten meters before she, too, slowed to a stop and turned.

He was already heading straight for the copse of trees nearest to the shrine, his steps slightly heavy as he raised his hands to his face to wipe the sweat from his eyes. Kagome followed him, doing the same.

Damn, so much sweat, she thought glumly as she resheathed her sword. I could irrigate a garden. Just stand in the middle and shake my head. Little kids can dance in my spray - no. Never mind.

When she reached the shade of the trees, Kazuo had already downed a whole bottle of sake and was starting on another one from his secret cache.

"Alcohol just dehydrates you," Kagome informed him reproachfully, like she had informed him for the past ten days. Leaning over she scooped up her own bottle, though hers was filled with water, and gave him a look as she took a pull from it.

"That just means I should drink more," Kazuo replied, long bony fingers coming up to catch a dribble of sake as it escaped his mouth.

"Nrg," was all Kagome had to say to that, turning away. Gingerly she took another gulp of water before swallowing rather noisily. Recapping the bottle, she set it down on the ground at her feet and then began to stretch out her muscles so they wouldn't seize up. Warm stone could only do so much, after all. If she was going to be any good at all...

...which she wouldn't. So forget it.

Then again, were Kazuo's insults actually his special brand of... well, of making her tough? Perhaps she was doing better than his constant mocking suggested. Somewhere in the back of her mind, Kagome was convinced, in a very fragile, ghostly way, that she was improving far more than she thought she was. Then again, what if she was doing even worse?

Her stomach did a little dance at that notion, and Kagome placed a hand quickly over her mouth in order to stifle the little urp it inspired.

Stupid nerves, she thought, feeling rather crankier than someone pumped up on endorphins really had any right to be. Maybe... if I find out once and for all...

"Kazuo-dono?"

Kagome didn't look at him as she talked - she was still stretching her hamstrings and her eye had been caught by a particularly vicious looking flower down by her toe that seemed, strangely, to be more wasp than flower - but she heard him swallow another mouthful of vile stuff before answering.

"What?" he wanted to know.

She continued to study the flower, wondering if she should reach out and try to determine if it was, indeed, as mean as it looked. "I was just..." she said, trailing off.

Kazuo waited. This was one of the many ways in which he was different from Sesshoumaru. Eventually natural curiosity would overwhelm the youkai lord and he would begin asking questions rather more pointedly; Kazuo just waited while she ordered her thoughts. Sometimes she was certain he forgot that she had

spoken after a while, since occasionally surprise would slink across his features when she once again opened her mouth, and she could almost see him running after the train of thought that had left the station ten minutes ago. He was good at concentration when it came to fighting, but he wasn't the greatest of thinkers.

Absently she cracked her knuckles, pulling the ropes of muscle high in her shoulders tight across her bones, trying to stretch them out like a band of taffy. "I was just..."

Kazuo was silent. Kagome heard swallowing sounds.

She straightened and began to stretch her arms, giving him a dubious look. "Well, first," she said, "why are you drinking?" Her toes felt itchy at the question, as if she was readying herself to duck away from a blow even though the samurai was eight or nine meters away.

However, Kazuo seemed less than inclined toward any quick movements. Instead, he just shrugged. "We're taking a break. That calls for a drink!" He flashed one of his eerie white smiles. "Now what was it that you really wanted to ask me?"

Kagome gave him a look. "Fine," she said. "I really wanted to ask you... uh..."

Kazuo kept his steady gaze on her as he polished off the bottle.

"Er... how..." Kagome wondered, "how am I doing?"

The samurai stared at her for a moment. "How are you doing?" he repeated. "Why don't you tell me?"

"I meant with my technique," Kagome said severely as she began to stretch her wrists. "How it's improving. As for me, I'm doing just dandy, thanks."

"Good to know, good to know," the samurai said. She watched as he relaxed his fingers, letting his sake bottle fall to the ground before he lifted a hand and rooted around inside his topknot, pulling out a long splintery piece of wood after a moment's searching.

Kagome's nose wrinkled. Don't do it, she thought. Don't stick that in your mouth, don't stick that in your mouth -

Kazuo stuck it in his mouth. Kagome stuck her tongue out in disgust as he began to roll it between his lips, chewing thoughtfully.

She watched as his eyes narrowed, seemingly staring off into the distance, and though she was intensely curious about what he was thinking, she couldn't help but keep her mouth shut and give him the same courtesy he gave her and allow him a quiet moment to think in peace.

After the requisite moment had passed, he appeared to reach a conclusion concerning her progress.

He carefully removed his makeshift toothpick - Kagome was just waiting for the day when he gave himself a splinter in his tongue - and tucked it back into his topknot. "You," he said, "are doing as well as can be expected."

For a moment Kagome was quiet, one of her wrists still caught and contorted in her hand, before she rolled her eyes. "Oh," she said. Really, she scolded herself, you probably shouldn't have thought it'd be anything more than that. "Is that good or bad?"

"It's..." Kazuo trailed off. "It's expected."

"You're not a lot of help, you know that?" Kagome told him, dropping her arms and shaking out her limbs in preparation for the next round of dodge and parry.

"Well then I'll just sit under this tree and drink sake if you don't think I'm helpful," he replied mildly, "but you're doing as well as can be expected. I think that is the best you could hope for, under the circumstances."

"So... I'm doing well?" Kagome asked, twisting her back in an attempt to crack the vertebrae as she strolled back into the grass.

"As well as can be expected."

"And that's the best I can hope for?"

Kazuo flashed another eerie smile, this one without warmth or humor. "Sure," he said. "Why not?" There was the slick sound of his katana sliding out of its scabbard. "Ready?"

"You're so comforting," Kagome told him as she unsheathed her own weapon.

"And I try so hard," he replied, and then he lunged at her again, and Kagome took off running, trying not to think about what would happen should she be caught, should she do less than expected. The high twanging of her nerves would only distract her.

Kazuo chased her over the field, and she dodged his attacks as best she could - though even now she could tell when he had to jerk backwards to avoid actually injuring her, and she cursed each instant. Her slip-ups were growing fewer and further between, but it only took one to bring her down.

Don't think, she thought. Just... go.

Kagome ran, darting through the tall, rustling blanket of the field, feeling the hems of her hakama being pulled back, dragging against the long dry whips, her shoes biting precariously into the carpet of slippery strands. Summer sun and golden grasses and the flash of her pursuer's blade all blurred together across her eyes.

"Having fun yet?"

Kagome almost groaned. He always asked this when she was getting tired; she suspected he thought of it as some sort of test of her ability to concentrate on the non-concentration required to survive. In her thigh, she felt ligaments tensing as they slid one muscle over and against another, and she was vaulting over the boulder someone had carelessly left hidden in the grass.

Her voice jarred as she landed and took off again. "No!" she answered, short of breath already. She kept a hand on her scabbard, ready to rip it out of her obi and smash someone in the face with it, but in her other hand she kept her wakazashi

low and ready to bring up at a split-second's notice.

"Okay!" Kazuo replied. "What about now?"

Her heart leapt.

Kagome twirled to her right just in time to miss the downstroke of his blade that would have sliced her brain in half. She didn't even bother trying to hit him with her own blade - he'd block it easily - just took off at a sharp angle into the deeper grass. She felt the little budding stalks of the towering weeds whip and scratch over her sweaty face.

Already he was fast on her heels. "What about now?" he wanted to know, and she could hear him grinning.

Kagome threw herself sideways. There was the clash of metal in a slow motion moment - she thought she saw her sensei stumble, just a little, but it had to have been her imagination - and she was free again, leaning forward in the samurai run she hadn't yet mastered as she beelined her way out of the dangerous foliage and back into the more foot-friendly, but also, regrettably, more exposed terrain.

Air burned as it snaked in and out of her mouth. The arches of her feet twanged. Her shoulders screamed for mercy.

He didn't bother to ask her this time, and she barely made it out of weapon range, though she forgot to move in and moved away instead. Kazuo would not let that go.

"How about now?" he demanded jovially.

Kagome darted, heard the whistle of his blade, moved away further, because he was probably turning and could catch her on the follow-through.

He was very close. Her breath sang harshly in her throat.

- and then -

"Now?" he cried happily, and Kagome twirled and ducked -

The katana sliced harmlessly through the air, whistling over her head, and without thinking Kagome lashed out with her sword, nearly chopping off her instructor's kneecaps before she jumped to her feet and darted away -

- but there was something wrong. Too slow. Feet slightly tangled in the hem of her hakama. Kazuo just a little too drunk. Something.

Whatever it was, it gave Kazuo just enough time to slice her leg open. It didn't take but a moment.

Then it was over, and the world seemed ever so slightly... off. Brighter, and louder, and suddenly a bit more crimson.

Oh, Kagome thought. It was all she could think of to think.

It was quiet. Serene. They were both very still.

She was still standing, but there was pain. A high, stinging, sore pain right across the side of her left thigh.

There was blood, too. Quite a lot of it, actually, seeping into the already red fabric of her hakama and spreading little blobby fingers through the woven cloth.

Kagome squinted, trying to figure out what had just happened to her.

"Um," she said. "Kazuo-dono?"

From the corner of her eye she saw the lanky samurai waver where he stood, just a little, as though he had shuddered beneath a blow. He didn't answer her.

"Er," she muttered, "I think I got injured." She blinked again.

Oh, you think? her brain said, sounding annoyed despite the fact that her brain was, technically, her, and she was feeling more scared than annoyed, and more confused than scared.

The part of her that was scared was thinking, This is what is going to happen to you. They will butcher you when you go to save Edo. You are going to die.

And the part of her that was confused was thinking, Why aren't I crying? This really hurts, but I'm not crying at all. I really should be crying. Or maybe I'm doing well to not cry... No, this really does hurt, but I'm not crying. Shouldn't I be crying?

"Kazuo-dono?" she said again, feeling slightly lost. She didn't know what to do, or what to think, or what to feel -

The world swayed. Or maybe she swayed. Yes, on reflection, the latter was more likely. She swayed, and there were things to be done.

Perhaps, she thought, very deliberately, I should go see if Fuyu can patch this up. Hm. Might need some help, there.

Kagome looked up, mouth open to ask Kazuo to help her out, but when her eyes met his she froze.

The samurai was pale as rice powder, dark eyes and dark, circular bruises of exhaustion giving him a gaunt, hunted look. For the briefest of moments Kagome wondered if he had been injured as well, but a cursory glance revealed no blood or guts, and at any rate his eyes were glued to her leg. He seemed entirely focused on the leaking red liquid seeping from her wound, shining between the ragged edges of her ripped pants.

She stared at her leg for a minute longer.

"Man," she said suddenly. "I'm so bad at sewing. This is gonna look awful."

Kazuo still wasn't saying a word.

So... catatonic instructor. This is... well, probably not good, Kagome thought to herself. Experimentally she flexed her left leg, but the sudden bright lance of pain that shot straight up the side of her thigh and across what seemed to be her entire lower body quickly put an end to that. She heard a hissing noise, and it took

her a moment to realize that it was her own small gasp of pain.

She saw Kazuo jerk at the noise and she looked up at him sharply. He looked like he was about to be sick. Desperately Kagome plastered a grin across her face.

"It's just a scratch!" she said brightly to him - she had to lean a little to catch his eyes. "See?" She gestured at it with the hand that wasn't holding the wakazashi - funny, but she would have thought she would drop it - but she didn't bother to look at it herself.

His eyes flickered between her wound and her face.

"It's fine," Kagome reassured him, still smiling. Funny, but hearing those words seemed to make it a little more real.

He was still frozen, gravitating back toward the wound, and she had to bend down a little more to catch him again. "But," she said, trying to sound cheerful, "I think I might need some help to get back to the shrine? Could you give me a hand?"

She smiled.

There was a long moment, and then Kazuo exploded.

It was like watching a mountain get dynamited. He had been so still, so paralyzed, that when his face suddenly melted into an ugly, twisted expression of rage, Kagome thought she had to be interpreting it wrong. He couldn't go from frozen to molten just like that -

He leaned forward, with all the appearance of a gargoyle. Then he yelled.

"Get out of here!" he screamed.

His voice was high and raw. It echoed. As the sounds bounced against the hills he waved a long, boney arm, as though trying to swat away a fly. "Get your filthy ass out of here, you stupid bitch!"

He lunged forward, waving his arm again. The tip of his bloody katana dragged a

little in the dirt.

Kagome stared.

Low in her throat, she felt her heart twist and shy away.

Instinctively she took a step back, though it was more of a lurch, and then she was in the middle of a summer field, wide wound across her thigh, and Kazuo was walking away, a purposeful stomp to his step, as though he were mad at the soles of his shoes.

He didn't look back.

Then the world seemed to turn over and become real again.

Very slowly Kagome shook her head. What the hell had just happened? What was going on? And how was she going to get back to the shrine without passing out?

The universe was not treating her well today, and at this realization Kagome scowled at nothing in particular. "What the goddamn shit...?" she muttered to herself on the off chance that swearing a little might make the pain in her leg go away. It didn't work, but she did feel ever so slightly better.

"Fuck," she added, just for good measure. "Now what?"

The one leg supporting her felt weak, but she didn't dare sit down. Instead she very slowly bent her knee and knelt, keeping her injured leg out to her side at an awkward angle and planting the fist still clenched around the wakazashi against the hot, dry grass as it folded under her. When she felt that she had her balance, Kagome took a deep breath and bent over, squinting in order to see the injury more clearly.

Gingerly she dabbed at it with the as-yet unsoaked cloth of her hakama and was quite relieved to find that it appeared to be extremely shallow; the little flaps of the wound where the katana had cut cleanly through seemed mostly skin, so there was little - if any - muscle damage, which was a bit of a blessing. If she used the right medicines it would be easily healed in a week leaving nothing but a thin

line of scar to mark its place.

On the other hand it was, in fact, bleeding rather copiously. With a sigh, Kagome gripped the hem of her hakama and began to rip.

Two minutes later she gave up trying to rip the thick fabric - why did such dramatic gestures always seem so much easier in the movies? - and instead hiked the wide hem up and wrapped it as tightly as she could around her upper thigh. Theoretically, Kagome supposed, she could have tried cutting strips with the blade she still held in her hand, but she wasn't sure she trusted herself to perform surgery with the wakazashi on her clothing while she was wearing it. Instead she just stood up, fisting the end of the excess fabric in a hand and holding it in place, and then turned toward the shrine and began the limping, laborious journey back to the long flight of steps.

She looked back only once to see Kazuo, head tipped back, sake pouring down his throat, and she couldn't decide whether to hate him or hurt for him so she just turned back and limped on.

A little over half an hour later, Kagome found herself getting stitched up by her mentor while a little cluster of soldiers hovered in the doorway, though occasionally Fuyu would turn and try to shoo them away.

Most of the samurai had vacated the shrine over the past week and a half, but there were still a couple hanging around tending the garden and it had been one of them who carried her up the steps. To Kagome's surprise they had collected quite a bevy of soldiers around her as they ascended, each of them peering at her with what seemed to be concern, though one of them did try to cop a feel of her exposed leg. He'd got a good kicking from one of the others for that. Secretly Kagome suspected they might like her just a little bit, since she was a tad gentler than Fuyu, but then again maybe they all just wanted a flash of decently shapely ankle. Either way it had put her at the top of the steps and into capable hands, so she was happy about that.

"Oooh," Kagome hissed. Fuyu was good with a needle, but it still hurt going in.

"Oh, shush, girl," the old miko chided. "The wound's worse than the cure. Shoo!"

This last comment was directed toward the men in the doorway. Without much care Fuyu stuck the needle through Kagome's skin again and left it there as she picked up her spoon and brandished it threateningly. "You got her here safely, now get!" she informed the looming figures loudly.

There was a small chorus of grumbles, but everyone seemed to respect the spoon. The soldiers melted away as Fuyu turned back to Kagome, who was staring with fascinated incredulity at the needle stuck through her flesh.

"I know you've seen a needle before, girl, so don't gawp like a fish!" the old woman snapped. Her dry, slightly wrinkled hands tightened on Kagome's leg as she pinched the piece of metal between thumb and forefinger and pulled it through.

"Hey! I was just - I'm not a pin cushion!" Kagome informed her reproachfully.

"Eh?" Fuyu said, sliding the thread after the needle. "Well, that's a shame. You make a good one."

"Ng," Kagome replied as she was skewered again, reluctant to get into a verbal sparring match with such a huge distraction capturing her attention. She would definitely lose.

It was over fairly quickly, and then Fuyu stood up and stalked over to one of the three corners of the hut piled high with ointments and lotions.

"So," she said sharply as she inspected the haphazard collection in front of her, "you're finally fighting for real, eh?"

Kagome, who had been peering at her leg and admiring, in a rather detached sort of way, the fin stitching on her wound, looked up in surprise. "What? Oh... well, I guess so. Maybe."

Fuyu just grunted as she cast a diamond-hard look at her pupil over her shoulder. "Mm," she said, appraisingly.

Unsure what else to do, Kagome stared back.

Then the old miko shrugged before bending down and selecting a large jar. "At least you're not crying," she said as she straightened and strode back to her patient.

Kagome shrugged back at her. "I guess I must be getting tough."

Fuyu only raised her eyebrows in what was probably disagreement before she uncorked the jar and dipped her hand inside. When she withdrew her hand there was a thick, orange goo on her fingers. With more care than Kagome thought the old woman had possessed, she began to smear the stinky unguent on Kagome's wounded leg.

They were both silent for a long moment. Outside in the courtyard Kagome could hear the muted murmur of soldiers gossiping and telling each other dirty jokes; through the cracks in the hut, she could see the sun light squeezing inside as the afternoon turned toward evening. Far off, a couple of crows cackled at each other.

Fuyu smoothed soothing circles into Kagome's stitched wound. Her face looked hard, but almost serene.

Kagome's mouth twisted.

"He yelled at me," she blurted. Inside her head she heard the echo of his cruel words bouncing up and over themselves, lodging deep in her brain to be replayed in moments of doubt. Her stomach was twisting worse than ever.

Get your filthy ass out of here.

The older miko didn't seem to make much of this declaration. "Mm," she said. "What did he say?"

"He told me to go away, and he called me... a stupid bitch."

Long white strands of hair that had escaped from her low ponytail swayed gently as Fuyu nodded. "And?"

Kagome frowned, just a little, and leaned forward a fraction. "And then he went back to drinking," she said.

For some reason Kagome had expected the other miko to be angry about this, but Fuyu just nodded once more.

There was a long silence.

"Um..." Kagome began.

Fuyu interrupted her. "Do you know why Kazuo stays with me?" the old woman asked almost dreamily. Kagome watched, almost hypnotized, as her mentor wound the long strips of clean fabric between her hands, and picked up her patient's leg in strong, cool fingers and began to loop the bandages over her wound.

Kagome shook her head. Over and over Fuyu looped the white cloth against her skin and the long, angry red line on the side of her thigh was swallowed slowly by a blanket of woven white.

"Kazuo," Fuyu said, her voice calm and still, "is a deserter. He has no family. He stays here because he has nowhere else to go."

Very slowly, Kagome blinked. Her mouth was very dry, and she licked her lips. "Um..." she said again, low and timid, "then... why did he...?"

With care, the older miko tied the bandage into place and stared at her handiwork. For some reason, Kagome thought she was avoiding meeting her eyes.

"Why did he yell at you?"

"Er... that, too, I guess," Kagome muttered.

Fuyu sighed, her eyes seemingly fixed on the white fabric she had wound around the leg in front of her. "Kazuo was never really meant to be a warrior," she said

absently. "He hates injuring others. He probably yelled at you because yelling at himself would just look silly."

Kagome swallowed. "Oh," she said softly. "He was... angry at himself."

Fuyu nodded.

"Why does he drink so much?"

There was a long, pregnant pause. "He... is not made to kill people," Fuyu said finally, and her voice was barely above a whisper now. "I suppose that one could say that now that he has done so, he is broken."

And in the darkness of Kagome's head, she saw a young boy in taiji-ya garb turn and smile at her.

Kohaku, she thought. She remembered the words of Sango, who had loved her brother so much.

He had been a gentle boy. He was never meant for that sort of thing either.

She hadn't cried at the wound, but for some reason the ghost of the haunted boy who gave his life twice brought a sharp knot in the back of her throat and a stinging to her eyes.

"I... Kohaku..." Kagome breathed sadly.

The old woman's face creased sharply at the sound of Kagome's voice. "I don't know who this Kohaku is," she said, "but I was thinking that Kazuo reminded me of someone else."

Kagome knew the answer before she even asked, but she had to do it anyway.

"Who?" she whispered, mouth dry.

The old woman's lips twitched, as though she had seen the punchline of a stupid joke coming from a mile away.

"You," she said. Then Fuyu raised her eyes.

Kagome couldn't move; she felt as though she were pierced, straight through the heart with a blade of flint. Fuyu looked straight into her head and chased her down, kept her from retreating, turned her around and forced her to really see, and Kagome could do nothing but swallow hard.

Fuyu was very still, so when her lips moved, it was as if the world had folded and collapsed around her mouth.

"I wonder," the old woman said thoughtfully, "if you still think the sacrifices are worth it?"

She'd aimed her arrow at so many people. She'd purified so many youkai. But that was then.

I didn't really think of it, did I? I thought evil was evil, and needed to be punished, needed to be neutralized. And it does, it's just... I'm older. Is evil still evil? Is it still that way now?

The words were already tripping off her tongue before she could stop them.

"Of course it's worth it," Kagome heard herself reply.

Then she didn't have anything else to say, so she stared back at the older miko, and they sized each other up.

The silence between them stretched tight, and then -

"Good girl," Fuyu said suddenly, patting Kagome right on the cut on her thigh. Kagome yelped in pain.

"Hey!"

Fuyu didn't seem to care, and was already rising to her feet. "Think you can get back to your camp by yourself?" she asked.

Scowling, Kagome scrambled up after her. "Yes, but - "

"Excellent," Fuyu snapped. "You can have the rest of the day off. And don't make me rethink my generosity!"

For one long moment Kagome just stood there until her body, who knew the meaning of the words 'day off,' jerked into action and her feet carried her, stunned, out of the door and into the sunshine.

* * *

The snake youkai lashed its tail against the ground, gasping for breath against the fiery poison seeping through its veins. Sesshoumaru sat, rather regally, he thought, on a tree stump some feet away.

"I can wait," Sesshoumaru said as though he were remarking upon how nice and bloodshot the sky seemed this evening. "I have all the time in the world."

The snake hissed angrily. "You have no time at all, Sesshoumaru-sama," it said, sibilant voice caressing the words with almost as much poison as Sesshoumaru had injected into its bloodstream.

"Correction," the youkai lord replied mildly, "I have all the time in the world compared to you."

There was another dry thwap as the snake slapped its tail into the earth, as though trying to distribute its pain evenly.

"Just tell me," Sesshoumaru continued, "any information you know, and I will make your death much quicker."

"I've survived worse than this," the snake hissed harshly. It's breathing was becoming more laborious by the second.

"Somehow," said the youkai lord, "I doubt that."

The snake let out another howl of agony. Ignoring it, the lord folded his hands into his sleeves and turned his gaze to the sunset.

Sesshoumaru was feeling more than a little perturbed, though he was taking great pains not to show it; this was the sixth youkai he'd found and killed today. First there had been the beetle, then the wolf - a scrawny one from the south, not one of Kouga's clan - then the two leopards and the hawk. Each one of them had reeked of the hunt, and there was no hunting for a few miles around unless one was inclined toward a delicious but probably gamey meal of human.

They all knew who he was, too. Not that everyone shouldn't know who he was, but it was just that much more sinister, knowing that they knew and had come anyway. Not to mention that he hadn't heard anything of his home, positive or negative, so he could only assume that it was still standing and still under the command of Myouga and the guards, but still, the ignorance was a small agony in the pit of his stomach whenever he thought of it, and he thought of it often, especially when killing insolent youkai. At least Kagome was safe.

Yes, he thought sourly, at least she's safe.

He couldn't believe how much comfort he found in that thought, nor how much he hated thinking about the alternative to a safe Kagome, which was a Kagome in danger, and he worked very hard at avoiding that. Clearly, of course, his relief was the relief of a job well done' or so he kept telling himself. Sometimes he wondered if there wasn't more to it.

For some reason, Sesshoumaru suspected that he was getting very good at not being entirely forthcoming with himself concerning his own motivations, and the thought irked him. He really didn't need to lie to himself when there were so many other people willing to do that for him, but on the other hand he couldn't think of any other plausible explanation for his increasing anxiety and obsession with her well-being.

The snake howled again, effectively - and mercifully - interrupting Sesshoumaru's thoughts.

Anyway. She was safe.

"I believe you have had ample time to reconsider your position concerning any useful information you might possess," Sesshoumaru said, standing up and strolling nonchalantly over to the writhing youkai.

"I have!" the snake cried. Sesshoumaru watched as it bit down on its own wrist.

"And?" he said.

The snake swivelled an evil eye on his tormenter. "I didn't say I'd changed my mind."

"All right," Sesshoumaru replied.

He cut the thing up a little more and gave it another dose of poison to keep it quiet before he turned and walked away.

Nightfall was rising over the trees. It was time to head back to Kagome.

Briefly a vision of Kagome in her thin, figure-hugging clothes flashed across his mind, her body cast golden orange in the light of the fire, and his feet sped up. There really was no point in denying himself this small pleasure, after all. He'd had a long day of killing things, and she was a lovely sight for sore eyes.

I should start getting the stones ready, he thought, imagining her melting beneath the soothing warmth as he placed them carefully against her body. It was certainly a better image than his memories of Izayoi and his little brother, at any rate, so it was an acceptable image to entertain. Three across the shoulders, he thought, and then down the spine...

And then blood on the air.

Sesshoumaru's first thought was, the snake was a decoy, and his second thought was, she's dead, and he was already flying through the air toward the smell of her blood, his mind full of nothing but the white-hot fog of panic and the bright, metallic silver of fear.

His hands curled reflexively into fists, and he could feel his own claws digging into his palms; his heart beat against his chest like a club against a door, and down in the pit of his stomach a curdled purple agony rose up.

He thought he could smell smoke, and tears. He thought he could smell the crease in history as it curled back.

My fault, he thought. Stupid, stupid.

His brain itched. Her blood filled his nose, his entire world, and the universe was a green, whipping blur as he streaked toward her, eyes wide, searching, searching -

Sesshoumaru's haste was so great that he nearly ran right over the one he was looking for, but it really didn't matter. She was sitting beneath a tree, as though waiting for him. He caught her shoulders in his claws.

Alive, he thought. Not dead.

Now he could just smell her blood and her annoyance with him. The smoke and tears were gone.

For her part, Kagome was entirely too self-absorbed at that moment to realize what was going on with him.

Dammit! she thought. And I was just getting to the good part, too! Beneath her fingers, the spine of the book she had been reading creased rather neatly, breaking the binding. She'd barely had enough warning to put it down as Sesshoumaru came crashing through the trees, so there were probably a couple of torn pages as well.

It had been a brand new book, too. Kagome pouted up at Sesshoumaru who was staring down at her as though surprised - she could see the slightest lift of his eyebrows, and his lips were ever so slightly pursed - but other than his expression and the fact that he had just come barreling out of the forest just to fondle her shoulders he seemed completely normal. His hair was a mess, though.

There was a pricking sensation on her shoulders. Yeesh, she thought, you'd think he'd learn.

"Ow," Kagome informed resentfully. "You have claws." She reached up and picked a twig from his bangs before flicking it away and waited for him to say something snide.

It didn't happen.

Instead, Sesshoumaru continued to stare at her.

After a moment of this, Kagome began to squirm a little. "Er," she said, "what's going on? Do I have something in my teeth?"

She'd been angling for a reaction, but was disappointed. The youkai lord just blinked slowly, and Kagome suddenly realized that she was thinly dressed, and his skin was on hers.

He was very close. If she leaned in only a few centimeters, she could touch her nose with his; she could see the strange, hard line of his markings on his skin, far more perfect and clean than any tattoo could ever be, could see the strange gold color of his eyes, dark at the edges but shining in the middle.

His lips looked very soft.

And, she thought dreamily, if I leaned in a few centimeters more, I could -

She had the briefest of dangerous visions of Sesshoumaru, lips to her throat, pressing her to the ground beneath him.

Suddenly wildly embarrassed, Kagome planted her hands on the ground and scooted backwards, or tried to. "Uh," she floundered. "Sesshoumaru?"

Then she felt the pressure on her shoulders ease up as he blinked again and then suddenly seemed to realize what he was doing. He drew back, and the world seemed to come back into focus again. Kagome took a shaky breath.

"God, warn someone when you're going to do that," she said unsteadily, looking away from his still strangely surprised expression.

From the corner of her eye, she saw him give the most minimal of elegant shrugs. "You are injured," he said finally.

It had been a very long day. "What? Oh, yeah. My leg. Don't worry, it's nothing bad, I just got... cut during training."

"Where?"

Her gaze flickered back to his face, but she didn't see anything angry there. It was probably safe to assume that he wasn't going to go kill Kazuo. "Here," she said, gesturing to her thigh.

And then Sesshoumaru did something very unexpected. He reached down and, calmly and gently, slid her pajama pants up her leg.

Kagome couldn't even squeak.

He was being very careful not to touch her skin directly, she could tell, but she was on fire all the same, and suddenly her strange little crush seemed a lot more insistent than normal. She stared transfixed at the strong hands gently bunching the material before them as he came closer and closer, up the swell of her calf, over the small bump of her knee, and then the curve of her thigh -

The bandage, now brown with dried blood, emerged. When he had revealed most of it, Sesshoumaru stopped.

Kagome was definitely not thinking about the fingers brushing against her inner thigh, and she was certainly not thinking, incoherently, please, and, just a little further...

Oh, dear god.

And Sesshoumaru could not think clearly, either. He could not stop staring at her. His relief was like water on his tongue.

He couldn't... didn't... he wanted...

Well, he wanted many things. But she was safe.

Sesshoumaru withdrew his hands, only to place his fingers lightly against the bandage. Kagome tore her eyes away from his claws to his face, only to find him staring at her, as if he could read her thoughts floating in the darkness of her head.

He still hadn't said a word. Kagome shrank away, looking for something to say, cast about, found something.

"I didn't cry," she said abruptly. "I'm not weak, I didn't cry..."

There. She saw it. She saw his eyes soften, though it was so subtly that she was almost convinced that she imagined it. She wondered if he pitied her. The thought made her a little angry.

She kept talking, because she didn't know what else to do. His fingers were still on her thigh. "I didn't cry, I came back to camp all by myself. Made dinner, too. Um... It'll be fine, and I'm fine, and... and I didn't cry - "

"Kagome," Sesshoumaru said.

And she hadn't cried, and she wasn't going to, even though she definitely felt like it.

Slowly, Sesshoumaru removed his fingers from her thigh and moved them to her face, brushing away the tears that weren't there.

Kagome felt her heart stop.

Then, just as quickly as he had appeared, he seemed to break whatever spell he had fallen into. Abruptly Sesshoumaru pulled away and rose to his feet.

"You should rest," he announced imperiously, as though he hadn't just felt her up.

"Can you walk?"

Dumbly, Kagome nodded, feeling slightly swept away by events.

"Good," Sesshoumaru told her, and then he turned and began to walk toward the campsite.

Giving up on making sense of the world today, Kagome scrambled stiffly to her feet as well and hobbled after him. "Hey," she half-yelled at his retreating back, "aren't you going to apologize for your stupid claws?"

* * *

At noon the next day Fuyu gave Kagome a thunderous frown and gave her bandages a particularly vicious tug as she tied them.

"Gnnnnrrrrg!" Kagome groaned between gritted teeth, her fingers scrabbling for purchase on the wooden floor beneath her. She refused to say, "ow" any more. She didn't want to wear it out, after all.

Fuyu didn't seem to mind the pain she caused. "Oh, yes, you're fit to train," she snapped sourly. "Just a moment and let me check again." She gave another tug.

"EEEEnnnnk!" Kagome replied.

"Seems like it still hurts."

"Aiiiinnng!"

"Still think you should train?"

"Yes!" Kagome blurted. "Yes! I have to."

"Oh, very well," Fuyu growled at her, "but don't say I didn't warn you. If you pull those stitches out you'll have to redo them yourself."

Kagome just nodded, watching as Fuyu tied the bandages off and then pulled her hakama down to cover her leg. "Right," the old woman said, climbing to her feet, "off you go. Tell that drunk bastard not to take his stupid shit out on you."

"Sure," Kagome lied, standing up. Her leg felt much, much better today, far better than she had thought it would, but she still was definitely not going to risk angering Kazuo. He had the big long sword, after all.

Fuyu just grunted and turned away, indicating that their conversation was over, so Kagome gingerly swung her backpack onto her back, checked to make certain that her wakazashi was securely in place, and walked out of the hut and into the sunny courtyard. She only had the slightest of limps and arrived at the top of the stairs without any trouble.

She leaned forward and looked down the long sweep of alabaster stone, just waiting for her.

Oh, steps. I love you so much, Kagome thought. With care, she leaned against the wall and inched her way down.

She really was doing much better than she had thought she would. That morning she had awoken snuggled up next to Sesshoumaru and feeling quite all right with the world; she hadn't even remembered that she'd been injured until she shifted to sit up.

"Oh. Right," she'd said at the sudden twinge.

"Forget something?" Sesshoumaru had asked, giving her a little smile when she shot him a glare.

"It's morning. I'm not at my best."

"Mm," he'd replied, and even though he'd said nothing at all Kagome was left with the distinct impression that he was agreeing with her in a less than complimentary way. She'd smacked him on the knee. He gave her the smallest of grins.

"Just for that, you don't get to spy on me while I take my bath," she'd told him. That wiped the grin off his face rather quickly. She was still patting herself on the back for that one.

After a little longer than she would have liked Kagome reached the bottom of the steps and turned right, towards their little outdoor dojo. She took a deep breath.

He was her teacher, and he had screamed at her to go away.

She couldn't, though. She needed him. Dimly, she wondered if he regretted saying those things to her, or if they were what he had always thought, and getting them out had been a relief.

In her stomach was a little, acidic knot of apprehension - she'd almost rejected her breakfast this morning, too, but had managed to keep it down - and now it tightened.

When you go to fight, Kagome thought, you'll feel like this. You'll feel worse, but you'll still have to go and do it.

So go.

Kagome went.

When she found him, Kazuo was drunk, sprawled beneath his tree where he kept his secret stash, and surrounded by sake bottles. Just the sight made her nervous.

He looked asleep, but as she took a timid step forward her shoes flattened the dry grass. At the sound he cracked open an eyelid.

Kagome almost froze, but really, he was just looking at her with a weary eye and didn't seem overly inclined to be abusive. He seemed, by all appearances, to be incredibly relaxed about the situation, which was more than she could say for herself, and she wondered, not for the first time, what it would be like to have such liquid courage all the time.

She didn't have a flask, though, so instead of trying it out Kagome just swallowed

hard and walked up to his supine figure, keeping her eyes on his own. As she neared him, she saw his eyebrows draw downwards, and for a moment she thought he was angry. That wasn't it, though; he just seemed rather perplexed.

She came to a halt a few feet away and put her backpack down. "Are we training today or what?" she asked him as haughtily as possible.

Instead of insulting her, he surprised her.

"How's your leg?" he wanted to know. His voice was fuzzy at the edges.

Kagome shifted a little on her feet. "Fine," she said. "It feels okay."

The samurai just snorted.

"It does," she insisted.

"If you say so," he replied.

"I do say so."

There was a little moment, and then he had folded his limbs and clambered rather unsteadily to his feet.

"You still want to fight? It hurts much worse than that, I'll tell you."

I know. I've always known, Kagome thought. I don't know if I'll hurt for the rest of my life, like you do, but I think... I think it's worth it. She lifted her chin.

"Yes," she said.

Kazuo looked away, seeming like a man who was neither pleased nor displeased, merely secure in the knowledge that the outcome he had predicted had come to pass.

"You are a brave fool," he said finally. There was the sound of his katana streaking from its sheath, and then there was a clash of metal as Kagome blocked.

She was already racing away from him as he followed through his downstroke, and he took off after her.

the part that is good is not original, and the part that is original is not good: Yes, yes, I'm updating a day early. Don't get used to it; I'm just sick of this chapter and want to get it off my hands before I decide to fiddle with it any more. I do, however, want to thank all of you for the veritable flood of reviews I received for the last chapter; I really do like to read what you think about my work. It makes me happy to know that someone is enjoying it. Oooh, oooh, I almost forgot! This story now has a deviantArt club for it, which tickles me pink. You can find it on the devArt website under the name 'houseofthemoon'. XD

Anyway, this chapter is not dedicated to anyone in particular. Instead it's just my thanks to the people who've helped make it worthwhile to continue, because they are such sweethearts and are so good to me and I don't deserve them. Thanks to Technoelfie and Cinnamongrr1 for making sure this chapter is vaguely acceptable, and thanks to quirkyslayer, Rumdiculous, and Suriyel for being so kind to me in so many ways. I haven't been a very attentive friend lately, but I just wanted you guys to know that you all mean a lot to me. Thank you.

Okay, enough mushy stuff. This chapter has... er... I'm going to call it lime-flavored UST. Blah blah, offensive, blah, don’t read, blah blah. Also I hacked canon, and it was good. On with the show!

Tales from the House of the Moon
by
Resmiranda

Chapter Thirty-One

"To be trusted is a greater compliment than to be loved."
- George MacDonald

* * *

Gazing down the long wooden shaft of her arrow, Kagome leveled her sight at her age-old enemy and took careful aim.

All right, she thought with determination, I don't like you, and you don't like me, but only one of us is going to walk away from this, and I'm going to make damn sure it's me.

For some reason, this did not sound quite right. She paused.

Well, okay, she conceded after a second's thought, I guess no matter what the outcome, only one of us is going to walk away because you're a tree and trees can't walk. And if they did I wouldn't want to know about it, because that would just be creepy.

Still! The fact remains that I have to shoot you with this arrow, and I'm probably going to do it badly and then get hit with the spoon. Which is made of wood. Which was once a tree.

So it all evens out, I guess.

Satisfied, Kagome fired.

As predicted, she felt a nice, solid thwap on her upper left arm.

"Ow!" she protested, letting her bow fall to her side as she lifted a hand to rub the spot. Well, that one is going to leave a mark, she thought grouchily. Just like... well, all the others, really.

"No good!" Fuyu snapped, her voice cracking across Kagome's ears like a whip. "You still aren't concentrating!"

Kagome glared at her resentfully, still rubbing the forming knot on her bicep. "Yeah, well," she said, "maybe if I didn't live in constant fear of getting hit when I did something wrong I'd be able to concentrate better."

The old woman sighed with an exasperation usually only seen in parents of

small children, and it had the suitable effect. Kagome felt six years old. She fought the childish impulse to make a rude face.

Fuyu shook her head. "If you can't focus properly with a little pain," she said with mock patience, "how do you think you're going to win? Going to talk the spirit into standing still for five minutes while you think about possibly considering to concentrate?"

To her dismay, Kagome considered this alternative for almost two seconds before realizing that her mentor was merely mocking her. Slightly annoyed with herself, she turned back to the tree against which she had pitted all her strength and cunning and still entirely failed to beat into submission. "I'll have you know that I'm very persuasive when I need to be," she muttered under her breath.

"Maybe you can persuade yourself to do it right," Fuyu replied.

Kagome cursed the old woman's preternatural hearing and tried to ignore her as she lifted her bow and prepared to try again.

Gazing down the long wooden shaft of her arrow, Kagome leveled her sight at her age-old enemy and took careful aim.

All right, she thought with determination, I don't like you, and you don't like me...

She fired.

There was an impatient sigh from behind her.

"All right, you're getting better," Fuyu piped up, "but it's still not strong enough. You should see the ripples."

This was perhaps the twentieth time Kagome had heard this exact same sentence. Repressing the urge to scream, she nodded and kept her eyes trained on the seal arrows embedded in the trunk of the tree. The poor thing looked like it had grown a set of bristles, like a toothbrush. Kagome felt ever so slightly bad for using it as target practice, but, as Fuyu had pointed out, there seemed to be a definite lack of available youkai on which she could

practice.

"Take a break," Fuyu ordered. Wearily, Kagome nodded and walked over to her backpack, where she withdrew a bottle of water, unscrewed the cap, and gulped it noisily. Reaching up, she rubbed the sweat from her forehead and looked around.

It was late afternoon; the time when they would stop for the day was drawing closer. If Kagome had to guess she would have estimated that it was probably nearing the end of June now; the light had that long look to it, as though it were stretching out over the world, lounging about and in no hurry to go anywhere. The hot afternoons were an itchy, annoying time to stand out in the sun, but at least it moved her combat practice to morning, even though Kazuo's morning persona was less than amiable; she'd even offered to make something for his headache, but he'd just snarled at her to mind her own business.

At any rate, Kagome had been at this for three days now and it was beginning to get frustrating. Well, to be fair, it had been frustrating for a while, but now it was starting to get on her nerves in the worst way possible. In the back of her mind, Kagome knew that she should have started on this training sooner rather than later, but the fact remained that she had put it off and Fuyu was entirely disinclined to take the initiative, so here she was, five days to the end of her four weeks and struggling to learn how to seal supernatural beings.

"Can't I just kill the thing?" she'd asked plaintively yesterday when she had pulled off a rather spectacular failure to perform a proper sealing.

"I don't know, can you?" Fuyu had responded, sounding bored. Kagome didn't blame her - she was bored with her failure, too, though experience told her that she would probably get somewhat hysterical about it fairly soon.

"I don't know," Kagome told her, "that's why I asked you."

The old woman had scratched her chin with the tip of her spoon for a moment before replying. "It takes less power to seal than to kill. If you can't kill it, sealing is the better, more accessible option. Unless of course you want to take your chances...?"

Kagome hadn't.

It really shouldn't have been that hard, but she was finding it difficult to rechannel her powers from destructive purity to containing magic. She'd never been properly trained, and her purity arrows were something that came naturally to her; she just wasn't sure how she did it.

It was different from learning to ignite her bow, too - that, at least, had been on the same principle as her arrows - but instead of a matter of summoning at will it was a matter of both will and focus. The power had to take on an entirely different shape and serve a completely different purpose; the contrast was like the difference between a noose and a net, and she was so used to tying that she almost couldn't conceive of the different principles involved in weaving.

Well, all right, it was a little more complicated than that, but it was the best analogy she had been able to come up with to help herself out. Net, not noose, she would think to herself as she released her arrow, but no matter how many nets she envisioned, the strange ripple of air that signified a well-made seal completely failed to materialize, and Fuyu did not take kindly to this. Kagome was positive that her upper arm was a permanent bruise by now, which didn't seem quite fair. It wasn't like she was failing on purpose.

Taking another gulp of water, Kagome thought back to lunchtime three days ago when she'd finally mustered the necessary courage to ask Fuyu about her end of the bargain.

Kagome wasn't entirely certain as to why she hadn't brought up the subject of her training before, but as she and Fuyu ate lunch together a thousand and one thoughts crowded at the front of her mind, struggling to be heard, and the loudest ones seemed to explain her curious reluctance.

Well, to be honest, her first and foremost thought was, god, I am sick of plain rice, but right on the heels of that thought was, maybe, just maybe, if I never learn how to seal, I'll never have to go fight.

It was specious reasoning at best, but the small hope did remain that if she avoided the problem forever she would never have to face it, though she knew from experience that this was most likely not the case. Still, she was nothing if

not an optimist; one of these days avoiding the problem had to work, right? It was statistics. Or something.

Looking over at the old woman who was ferociously chewing her lunch and staring at the floorboards in front of her as if she and they were not on speaking terms, Kagome took a deep breath.

"Are you going to teach me to seal demons?" she blurted, almost wincing at the blunt demand. Oh yes, she thought, I'm just that smooth. There really was no other way to phrase it - time was running out.

After a moment of contemplation, Fuyu nodded.

“You'll be training with me today instead of Kazuo," she said.

Relief washed over her. "Thank you, Fuyu-sama," Kagome said sincerely.

Fuyu simply nodded, acknowledging her own graciousness.

After another long moment, Kagome swallowed her current mouthful of rice with difficulty, and gathered her courage to ask her other question.

"Fuyu-sama?"

"What is it now, girl?" Fuyu seemed to tear her gaze away from her stare-down with the floor in front of her.

Feeling her eyebrows twitch in irritation, Kagome lifted her chin so that she might look a little more confident than she actually felt. "Shouldn't I have learned this a little... sooner?"

The old woman shrugged her bony shoulders. "Maybe. I was simply waiting for you to mention it."

Kagome twisted her mouth into an approximation of a displeased grimace. "Is this one of those silly mystic things?" she asked. "Like, you would know that I would be ready when I asked you?"

"Don't be stupid," Fuyu advised her. "I was just putting it off. Frankly I was

wondering if you were ever going to mention it. Thought I might get a month of free servitude out of this deal." Setting aside her bowl, the old woman climbed to her feet.

"Well," she said, moving to the door to gather her bow and arrows, "let's get this over with."

Feeling peevish, Kagome scrambled after her and followed her into the sunlight.

The few soldiers that remained - there were probably less than a dozen left - were seeking respite from the noonday sun beneath the shady trees that crested and spilled over the alabaster walls of the shrine. They found Kazuo snoring beneath the branches of a particularly impressive beech in the far southeast corner. Kagome watched as Fuyu gave him a kicking and informed him that he could drink the afternoon away if he wanted because Kagome was coming with her, you lazy bastard, and he replied, somewhat indistinctly, that he was planning to do that anyway, you pushy bitch. Were it not for the fact that Fuyu had about forty years on Kazuo, Kagome would have sworn that they were flirting; sadly, the mental image that followed fast on the heels of this idle thought made her wish that she were blind in her inner eye. She was still reeling from the disturbing little picture show in her head as they crossed the wide expanse of grass between the shrine and the woods.

Little insects jumped and leapt out of the way of their feet as Kagome followed her to the line of trees that marked the beginning of the large forest, and Fuyu ordered her to stay where she was before turning to the towering oaks and maples. Kagome watched as the old woman began to walk up and down the line, looking for just the right tree to use as target practice. Fuyu's bearing put her in mind of a general or a sergeant, and any second now she half-expected the old miko to bark, "Men!" in a clipped, commanding voice before delivering a speech about the glories of war and dry socks.

Sighing, she turned to the sky and studied the feathery edges of the treetops. It was hot, and she wanted to sit beneath one of them, but Fuyu had ordered her to stand still and she had received enough spoon for one day. Longingly she cast a glance over her shoulder at the shrine, where at least there was shade.

The white shrine lay back against its hill, just as serene as ever, but for some

reason the vista before her gave her a sudden, dizzy spot of deja vu. It took a moment for Kagome to realize that the scene looked so familiar not because she saw it every day, but because right here was where she and Sesshoumaru had emerged, almost three weeks ago, from their short journey through the forest.

In the back of her mind Kagome felt the tickle of nervous recollection at the sight; she knew that somewhere beyond the woods at her back lay the House of the Moon, and that knowledge sat heavily in the base of her mind, weighing everything else down and drawing all her worry to it. Sesshoumaru was right - she needed to be focusing on her own predicament - but every time the memory of his home trailed through her head she couldn't help but remember the danger it was in. She was in danger, too - youkai, battles, fatigue and sickness - but knowing that all this was her fault and, worse, that she had chosen it freely made her sick to her stomach.

What a mess she'd made.

Suddenly feeling rather more disheartened than she had been a moment ago, Kagome turned back around to see Fuyu standing in front of a particularly large and imposing tree, inspecting it with a critical eye. Kagome couldn't imagine why the old woman would have to choose their target with such care - one tree seemed as good as another - but she assumed her mentor had her reasons. She wasn't going to ask, anyway.

After a moment Fuyu jerked her head in a curt nod and pivoted neatly in the grass, striding with purpose to a spot fifty feet or so from the tree. Casually she raised a bony arm and snapped her fingers at Kagome as though demanding the attention of a waitress in a restaurant.

Anything else I can get for you, ma'am? Kagome thought as she trudged through the long grass toward her.

"Shoot the tree," the old woman said when she arrived. "Let's see what sort of power you have."

With a feeling that was almost relief Kagome nodded and unshouldered her bow. Carefully she nocked an arrow and took aim.

Now this she could do. She was not a master archer as Kikyou had been, but she was still pretty damn good if she did say so herself; something about seeing jaws full of needle sharp teeth coming straight for you was incredibly motivating. At the tips of her fingers she felt her power build, and in her hands the arrow glowed.

She fired.

The arrow hit its target perfectly, right in the middle.

Beaming, Kagome turned to Fuyu, who, for a change, seemed to be nodding her head in approval.

"Right," the old woman said after a moment. "You have power, I'll give you that, and that's good. Now you just have to channel it differently. I'll tell you right now that sealing isn't very hard, it just takes concentration. Sealing takes less power than straight purification, too, so if you have a strong opponent that isn't as susceptible to your purity as others you can seal it instead of kill it. You think of hitting your target when you release your arrow, yes?"

Blinking, Kagome nodded; this was the longest she had ever heard Fuyu speak without an insult of some sort tumbling out of her mouth. It was a little unnerving. On the other hand she was sure the old miko would be back to her barbed comments soon enough, so she just listened, trying to enjoy it while it lasted.

Fuyu, oblivious to the fact that her pupil was feeling a tad dumbfounded, continued on, drawing an arrow from her own quiver and aiming carefully.

"Good. All you have to do is think differently. It's the same with any art - a small change can make all the difference. Instead of thinking of piercing your target, instead imagine yourself surrounding it with your arrow." With that, Fuyu released.

The arrow hit the tree with a solid thunk. Kagome frowned and looked back at her mentor.

Fuyu was nodding sagely. "Mmm," the old woman said, "that was a good one."

"Er," Kagome said, bewildered, "how can you tell?"

Predictably, Fuyu turned and gave her a haughty look. "You didn't see?" she asked, as though to suggest that only the most retarded person would not be able to discern between a seal and a normal arrow.

"No," Kagome replied sullenly. "What am I supposed see?"

With a sigh, Fuyu drew another arrow. "Look at the air around it, not at it." With that she nocked the arrow, aimed, and fired again.

This time Kagome understood what she had been talking about, though if she hadn't known where to look she would have completely missed it. Instead of the bright light of a pure arrow, the sealing arrow was plain and simple and looked exactly like a regular arrow, except for one thing: sweeping out and forward from the tip was a strange rippling of the air, expanding outwards like a net until it hit the tree. For a split second she saw the trunk shimmer as though it were merely a projection or mirage before it became solid again.

"Ah," she said.

"You see? Good. Now you try."

The old woman moved away and nervously Kagome stepped up to take her place. Slowly and deliberately she reached back and withdrew another arrow. Taking careful aim, Kagome let her eyes lose focus as she tried to concentrate on changing the nature of her arrows, though truth be told she had very little idea how she created purifying arrows in the first place. Frowning, she tried to think of how it felt to gather the power at her fingertips, and then tried to think of it expanding outwards.

She fired. There was no wavering air, and no sealing arrow. Damn, she thought angrily. Did I not concentrate hard enough?

She heard the old miko shift behind her. "No," Fuyu said. "Again!"

Nodding obediently, Kagome nocked another arrow, concentrated, and fired.

"No. Again!"

Kagome did it again. And again. And again.

And again and again and again until here she was, two days later and on the verge of maybe possibly performing a successful seal, though a the odds heavily favored a mental breakdown instead.

Sighing, Kagome capped her water and stood again, stretching out her tired body. She was definitely more in shape than she'd been at the beginning of the month, but that didn't mean she wasn't sore most of the time.

She walked back to take her place in front of the target. Fuyu was standing a little ways off, looking at the sky and frowning.

"Er," Kagome ventured, "shall I do some more?"

For a moment the old miko didn't answer. Then she abruptly dropped her chin and glared at the ground, as though the landscape were a bit too cheeky for her liking.

"No," she said.

Confused, Kagome stood where she was, a little awkwardly, and watched her mentor think in the fading light.

"All right," Fuyu finally said, "let's try something different."

Kagome, who had been expecting something a little more violent and a bit spoonier simply blinked. With what was perhaps an unreasonable degree of optimism, she decided that this idea sounded almost promising; at this point she was willing to put on a giant rabbit suit and sing Beethoven's Ninth if it would help her get it right. She was so willing to do anything that she didn't even shy away when Fuyu strode over to her and put her hands on her shoulders.

Then the old miko looped one of her legs around the back of Kagome's knees and twisted.

There was a loud crack, not unlike the popping of a sheet of bubble wrap.

"Ow!" Kagome shrieked, jerking away. "What on earth was that for?"

"Felt that, did you?" Fuyu asked unrepentantly.

She had felt it all right - felt as though someone had just jumped up and down on her spine. "Obviously I did!" Gingerly she worked her shoulders, testing to see that she still had all her vertebrae.

The sharp pain was fading now, and Fuyu was looking insufferably self-satisfied. "Good," she announced, "because that's what you're going to be thinking about when you fire."

"What, back pain?"

"No, girl!" the old woman barked. "Loose! Free! Relaxed! You keep wanting to hit something when you need to grab it instead. Like an open hand instead of a fist."

"That was not relaxing," Kagome shot back, "and what the hell are you talking about?"

"Bah!" Fuyu shouted, throwing her hands up in the air in disgust. "Think about releasing what is tight! Like cracking your back, which I just did for you. You're mighty tense," she added gratuitously.

"Really?" Kagome asked snidely. "I can't imagine why."

"No complaining, girl," Fuyu admonished, turning smartly on her heel and walking behind her. "Now think about that as you concentrate."

Obediently, albeit with no small amount of exasperation, Kagome did as she was told, drawing the bow back and taking aim. For a second she looked at the tree and didn't move.

"Um..." she said.

"What?"

"How am I supposed to concentrate on relaxing?"

Fuyu made a threatening noise. "Just do it!" she said. "Or you'll feel the back of my hand!"

Considering how hardy the old woman was Kagome estimated that getting a sharp cuff along the head from her would be something akin to getting hit by a two-by-four. She clamped her mouth shut and stared at the tree, trying to shut her head down... to calm down... and just... release...

Kagome released.

She watched with fascination, almost in slow motion, as the air rippled around and out, in an ever expanding net until it hit the tree and she could almost see it wrap around the trunk with the impact of the arrowhead burying itself in the wood.

Oh, she thought. Was that all I had to do?

"Finally!" Fuyu snapped. "Try it again."

She did.

The next three tries yielded the same result, though with varying degrees of success. She couldn't seem to get a grasp on how to control the strength of the seal; she couldn't even tell that there was a difference, though Fuyu swore that there was.

"No, no, no," the old woman snapped after the fourth successful seal. "Too weak, too weak."

Kagome made a frustrated sound in her throat. "How am I supposed to make it stronger?" she asked.

The old woman gave her a look. "You have to release everything," Fuyu replied, then shrugged. "I can't explain it better than that. It would help if there were any strong youkai around for you to practice on, but I think someone has been killing them all."

Ehehe, Kagome thought, looking away and wondering what Sesshoumaru was doing right now. "Yeah, he's kind of... protective," she muttered.

"He is a dog," Fuyu replied almost flippantly. "That is his nature."

Kagome just nodded.

There was a moment of quiet while both mikos stood in the fading light of the sun and contemplated this problem. At the edge of her mind, Kagome felt the familiar, comforting wave of Sesshoumaru's youki as he traveled in her direction, heading back to camp for the night. More than anything right now she wanted to sit with him next to the fire and just be, not fight or think or try to be the heroine of a story with an ending that still felt uncertain. She just wanted to be Kagome, with Sesshoumaru. It seemed impossible to be anything but only herself with him, and right now she needed that badly.

She felt tired, and wished she were already by the fire.

"Girl."

Jerked away from her contemplation Kagome's eyes snapped to Fuyu, who was looking at her contemplatively. "Yes?"

"You'll bring your youkai with you tomorrow," she said. In the red sunset, her eyes shone dully, like a strange, hard fire.

"He's not mine," Kagome said automatically.

She saw Fuyu's lips twitch at the corners, the strange smile of one who is amused by a humorless situation. "Yes, he is," she replied. "Bring him."

Blinking, Kagome shook her head. "Why?" she wanted to know. There was a certain strangeness to the older miko's voice that ran like cold water into the pit of her stomach.

"I think you know, girl," she said, turning away and beginning to walk back to the shrine. "Go get some rest. You'll need it tomorrow."

The tiny sliver of anxiety twisted inside her. "Why?" she cried. "Why do I need

him?"

"Practice!" Fuyu called.

Practice. The word floated through her mind, and for a moment Kagome stood still as glass before she realized just what the old miko meant. "No!" she shouted suddenly. Her legs jerked and she began to run after her. "No, you don't understand, I can't do that!"

Fuyu whipped around and pinned her with a glare, causing Kagome to stumble to a halt, staring at her in horror.

"You want to die?" the old woman demanded, and the hard fire in her eyes flickered.

Blood draining from her face, Kagome shook her head. Fuyu gave her a curt nod.

"All right then," she said, and without another word she turned and began the walk to the shrine, leaving Kagome standing in the falling night.

* * *

All around Sesshoumaru the night was a warm and quiet one, a soft blanket of darkness illuminated by the welcoming glow of the fire. In the folded, shadowy depths of the forest, illuminated only by the waxing moon, Sesshoumaru could hear the nightbirds call to each other, and out in the field the fireflies were no doubt winking in and out of existence, dancing through the curtain of the world and back again, looking for each other. It was a fine night.

Except that Kagome was upset, and he had come to terms with the fact that he didn't like it when she was upset; it made him... concerned.

Slightly disturbed Sesshoumaru resumed unstrapping his armor - the change in her scent had caught him in the act of removing it - and put it to one side. Toukijin and Tenseiga were already lying within easy reach of his normal spot and the fire was burning brightly once more. Gracefully he sank to the ground

and leaned against the trunk of the tree as Kagome emerged from the forest and into their clearing. Sesshoumaru quietly studied her face, wondering if he could discern what was bothering her from her bearing alone.

She definitely was acting differently. Since Kagome had begun her combat training the two of them had settled into a pattern that was both comfortable and disquieting; comforting, because they seemed to have slid smoothly and seamlessly into each other's lives with a minimum of disruption, and disquieting precisely because it was so easy for them to do so. In fact, everything about Kagome seemed easy - she was easy to talk to, easy to tease, easy to miss, easy to admire - and yet because it was all so easy it was all so difficult as well. It pleased him to be with her, yes, and he always did what he pleased, but it was beginning to dawn on him that what pleased him was not necessarily what would be best.

Of course he still wasn't thinking about all of this since whatever conclusions he might draw would probably disquiet him more than he was already, but he had to admit that trying not to think about it probably took up just as much time and caused just as much distress as if he just gave in and examined the situation. On the other hand, he was good at not thinking about things. He'd had a lot of practice, after all.

One of the things he certainly wasn't thinking about was the incident seven days ago when Kagome had been injured and he had also become... concerned.

Yes. Concerned. That was what it was. After gingerly mulling it over in his mind Sesshoumaru had concluded that, despite all evidence to the contrary, he had not panicked, because he was Sesshoumaru and panicking was simply something that Sesshoumaru Did Not Do. This conclusion was immensely reassuring to him. Of course, there was a myriad of things Sesshoumaru Did Not Do, so no matter what happened, clearly he Had Not Done these things, even when he had. The very long list of things Sesshoumaru Did Not Do included panic, fail, scratch himself in public, and paperwork.

He also Did Not Speak of such incidents, and to his grateful, if pathetic, relief, Kagome Did Not Speak of the incident either. So it had Not Been Spoken Of.

There remained, however, a slight tension in the air since that evening, stretched between them like the string of a bow. This was another thing that

was Not to be Spoken Of, even though it was clearly there - the feeling was tense enough that one could hear it hum in their quieter moments, but slight enough not to be noticeable most of the time.

He couldn't feel that certain tension now, though, because it had been replaced with something else. As she drew closer into the circle of firelight he could see a very fake smile plastered across her face, and there was a thin line of tension running through her normally smooth throat.

"Good evening!" Kagome said brightly as she dropped her backpack to the ground. "How was your day?"

Sesshoumaru cocked his head to the side, listening to the tightness in her voice. "It was not objectionable," he replied absently.

He watched as her face melted into a frown. "God," she exclaimed, seeming to be momentarily distracted from her worries, "you are so boring sometimes." Sesshoumaru raised a brow as she flopped down in the dirt. "In fact," she continued, seemingly grateful for the unwitting diversion he had provided, "and don't take this the wrong way, but I think you might even be anti-interesting. Like you suck all the interesting out of anything that happens to you."

Sesshoumaru had been called many things in his life, but boring was never one of them. Anyone who had been acquainted with him for any period of time tended to quickly acquire a life suddenly filled with terribly interesting things indeed, though as events played out such excitement also tended to be regrettably short as well. Yet here she was, informing him that he was, in fact, the antithesis of engaging. His lips curled slightly.

"And why," he wondered, "would you possibly think that?"

"Because," Kagome cried in despair, "no one, and I mean no one, in the history of the world, has ever had sixteen days in a row that can only be described as 'not objectionable!'"

"I merely find it to be an accurate summation," he replied mildly. She was right, of course - his days were actually far more exciting than they had been in a long time, what with all the bloodshed and worry - but it would not do to

have her know that. He had an image to maintain, after all. Unfortunately, he suspected that Kagome already knew that his grasp upon omniscience was far more tenuous than he let on and was merely keeping his secret to herself. In fact, he was beginning to entertain the terrifying possibility that she might have him almost figured out, a state of affairs that he found particularly unfair as he usually had problems figuring himself out, and as such he felt entirely unqualified to even attempt to return the scrutiny. He could sense her changes in mood, but as to her motivations he usually remained in the dark, even when she patiently explained them to him.

Kagome, for her part, was now feeling not only tense but exasperated as well.

Honestly, he always made things so difficult; he always acted as though she had asked him an intensely personal question, like what color boxers he was wearing, rather than a simple, polite inquiry about his day.

Taking a deep breath, Kagome tried to expunge the irritation from her system.

He's not human. He's youkai, remember? He doesn't think about all that sympathy crap very often, she said to herself. This, at least, was true; he'd yet to express any interest in her days, though that was probably because he kept such a close eye on her and knew everything she did anyway. It wasn't as if she had particularly interesting days, either: wake up, get hit with a spoon for six hours, have lunch, dodge katana for the rest of the day. On the other hand she couldn't help but think that sometimes it might be nice if he acted like he cared what she felt, though to him it probably didn't matter how she felt about the state of affairs since her feelings wouldn't change her circumstances.

Then again, maybe he cared but didn't know how to show it; perhaps she could send him to obedience school for a little bit of his own training. For a second she entertained a rather pleasing vision of Sesshoumaru sitting on his haunches the way Inuyasha used to do, balancing a dog biscuit on his nose. He would be allowed to eat it only after he inquired, solicitously, as to how her day had gone, and complimented her on her new haircut, which of course he had noticed without being told.

On the other hand, she was glad that he did not ask her such things today, since she wasn't sure she would be able to lie to him if he did, and she was most definitely not going to tell him about Fuyu's ridiculous command. When

she went to train tomorrow she would simply inform the old bag that he had refused and that she could not persuade him; surely Fuyu would understand that when a daiyoukai made up his mind there was probably no way to force him to change it.

And, of course, there was no way to change her mind, either. She would rather take her chances and fail than "practice" on him, and she was baffled as to why Fuyu might have ever thought otherwise. If she hadn't been so shocked Kagome was certain she would have hauled off and punched her mentor in the nose for the suggestion, old woman or not.

Wearily, Kagome pinched the bridge of her nose between thumb and forefinger and tried to massage out the ache that wasn't there.

From his spot beneath the tree Sesshoumaru watched as the lines of her body grew rigid again beneath the weight of whatever problem it was that plagued her mind. Not for the first time Sesshoumaru wished that he had the ability to read her thoughts, though, now that he was seriously wishing for such a talent, it dawned on him that any information he would be able to glean from Kagome's head would probably be far more confusing than any answer she would give him anyway. He would just have to settle for the old fashioned method.

"What is troubling you, Kagome?" he said abruptly, voice cutting through the crackle of the fire.

At the sound her head shot up and she looked at him with wide eyes before she sat up straighter, tucking her legs beneath her almost skittishly, as though she were coiling for a spring for safety. "Nothing!" she said, a little too brightly. "I was just... thinking about what I wanted for dinner."

Sesshoumaru frowned at her reaction. "You have the same thing for dinner every night."

Kagome tittered nervously. If Sesshoumaru had indeed received his wish, the thoughts he would have been reading at that moment were, Damn! I guess he's not as dumb as he acts.

"Yeah, well..." she fumbled. "I was thinking about what I wanted, not what I

was going to have."

One eyebrow rose slightly higher.

Kagome squirmed.

Sesshoumaru briefly considered telling her that he could smell a lie, but that was untrue; she was just so fundamentally honest that he could see through her on a cloudy day. He liked that about her; she wasn't a straightforward creature by nature as he was, but she, too, found it difficult to tell an untruth, and everything betrayed her when she did. She was hiding something from him. He didn't like it.

Nervously, Kagome shifted where she sat. He was staring at her. Of course, he'd done it before, but she hadn't been lying to him then; already there was a hot, miserable coil of guilt settling happily into her stomach, probably to have a little chat and a spot of tea with the cold feeling of dread that had been curdled there for months.

"Kagome."

She didn't dare respond for fear that she would blurt out the horrible thing Fuyu had told her to do. Somehow just the mere knowledge of the order made her feel complicit, as though just by knowing of it she was partially responsible and he would blame her for it. No, she couldn't look at him.

"Kagome," he said again.

Her mouth remained shut and her eyes averted. Hey, there, hakama, Kagome thought, staring at her knees, haven't seen you in a whole two minutes. How have you been?

"Kagome."

She wished he would stop saying her name.

When she heard the intake of breath for a fourth repetition, she clenched her teeth tightly.

"I'd rather not talk about it," she blurted, then cursed herself for tacitly admitting that there was, indeed, something bothering her. Damn! She was never any good at this sort of thing.

"And I would rather you did," he replied calmly.

She didn't want to keep things from him, but she just... couldn't. Desperately she lifted her gaze to meet his.

Sesshoumaru stared back at her, and the haunted, hunted look on her face turned his blood to lead, as his concern mounted higher and higher. "Kagome," he said, and he was unable to keep the small note of urgency from his voice, "you must tell me."

He watched as she gulped and turned away again. "It's nothing," he heard her say, so softly that he would have missed it if he had been human. Sesshoumaru said nothing in reply, merely left the space between them empty and waited for her to fill it.

The fire leapt and subsided before her eyes, and Kagome gazed into the heart of the flame with an almost hypnotized fascination; she could hear the heavy silence he had left behind in the air, and he knew that she hated such uncomfortable gaps that left people always at odds with each other, unable to fit together around the voids left by words unsaid.

Her voice crowded at the front of her mouth, gathering on the tip of her tongue and begging for release. The crack of wood consumed by flame sounded very loud in the night.

Kagome shut her eyes.

"It's... Fuyu," she said haltingly from behind the curtain of her eyelids, as though somehow shutting out the world outside her head had somehow unlocked her voice.

Sesshoumaru continued to say nothing, and Kagome could think of nothing to tell him but what she wanted so badly to avoid.

"She wants you to come with me tomorrow, while I train."

Slowly, the youkai lord blinked, not comprehending the reason she seemed to think this to be such a calamity.

"Why?" he wanted to know.

And there, he saw her begin to pluck at the cuffs of her sleeves. She still refused to look at him.

"Practice," she muttered.

For a moment he still did not understand until it dawned upon him all at once.

Ah, he thought, curiously detached from the implications. "I see," he said out loud.

Kagome's slender fingers were working at the red stitching at the cuffs of her bell-like sleeves, gently loosening one stitch while simultaneously pulling all the others a little tighter, scrunching up the edges. "I wasn't going to tell you," she said quietly. "I wish you hadn't asked."

Sesshoumaru wished he hadn't, either.

For a long moment neither of them said anything until Kagome shifted where she sat.

"Maybe..." she said, then stopped and swallowed. "Maybe," she tried again, "if you could find a youkai, I could... practice... on it?"

"No," he said immediately.

Against her will her eyes snapped to his, and Kagome almost gasped at the strange, hard expression on his face - not because she hadn't seen it before, but because it was the same one that Fuyu had worn. The strange, eerie hollows cast by the firelight gave him a queer, alien appearance; the thin line of his lips and the hard, strange arch of his brows sent shivers down her spine. He looked so... determined, as if he could see something she could not, and was wondering when she would open her eyes.

"Why not?" she demanded, and there was a thin string of desperation under the question.

He merely closed his eyes and gave a short, sharp laugh. "As if I would allow another youkai that close," he replied.

You'll have to some time, she thought miserably, but didn't voice her thoughts out loud. Instead she abruptly stood and began to root through her backpack, not looking at him. "Forget it," she said briskly. "I already decided that I'm not going to do it, so there's no reason to think about it any more."

She kept digging for her toiletries as she heard him shift against the trunk of his tree.

"And what will you tell the miko?" he asked her.

Surprised, she paused for a fraction of a second before resuming her search. "I'll tell her that you said no," she informed him as she pulled out her soap and shampoo, then tucked her towel and pajamas beneath her arm. She turned toward the stream, determined to stay true to her word and expel the thought from her mind.

"So you will go into battle untested?"

Kagome stopped in her tracks. She looked back over her shoulder and smiled at his solemn face. "It wouldn't be the first time," she said flippantly before beating a hasty retreat into the trees, not wanting to think about that either. When she returned he was sitting with his eyes closed, hands folded into his sleeves. He ignored her as she cooked her dinner, ate, and crawled into her sleeping bag.

They went to sleep without exchanging another word that night.

* * *

When Kagome woke up the next morning she felt as though she had reached a very good place to be, which was the land of Not Caring What Fuyu Thought. Here in the land of Not Caring What Fuyu Thought, Kagome could rest assured

that even if Fuyu thought she was being an idiot, she, Kagome, was not obligated to care and thus there was no reason to feel at all guilty or unhappy about anything the old woman might say regarding Kagome's intelligence, intentions, or parentage.

It was grand.

With a spring in her step, Kagome jumped out of her sleeping bag and bustled about, preparing for the coming day of Not Caring At All, Nope, Not At All, Really.

For his part, by the time the world had turned toward the predawn hours, Sesshoumaru had made a decision: he was going to do something that would seem, to the outside observer, to be really stupid.

Of course, Sesshoumaru had decided to do many, many stupid things in his life, but, by all outward appearances, this seemed to be the dumbest one.

It seemed ridiculous. Utterly moronic. In fact, it appeared to be such a stupid thing that the casual observer would conclude that he had gone completely insane; even considering such a move seemed to indicate that he was several miles over the border between 'sane' and 'barking mad' and accelerating. Of course, looking back on everything he also knew that the casual observer would conclude that he had obviously not been in his right mind for a while.

Clearly, a casual observer would be wrong, of course, because here on the inside of his head it was all very logical and made perfect sense, and therefore did not warrant any second guessing. He was perfectly sane. Clearly.

Definitely not at all crazy, in any way.

Swishing red hakama passed across his field of vision and Sesshoumaru realized that he had been staring off into space. He raised his eyes to see Kagome standing a few feet away, her backpack slung over one shoulder and one hip cocked rather saucily. She had a very large, very fake smile on her face.

"Ready?" she beamed at him, smelling nervous.

For a long moment he looked at her before nodding and rising to his feet, falling into step behind her as she strode into the trees toward the large meadow that led to the shrine.

As they had strolled this way many times over the past few weeks Sesshoumaru felt that the view, never anything terribly special to begin with, could be safely ignored in favor of watching Kagome as she walked ahead of him. Tilting his head, he studied her gait closely with as clinical an eye as he could muster, and decided that the confidence radiating from her stiff spine was almost convincing. If she only had fifty years or so, he reflected, she could probably learn to control the scent she gave off and conceal her anxiety completely.

If only.

Something inside twisted up and over itself at this thought. She was in such danger...

Well, all the more reason for him to go through with this very, very stupid plan.

They were nearing the shrine now, and Kagome was slowing to a stop as she turned to say goodbye.

"Have a good day!" she told him brightly.

"I will," he replied.

They stood there for an awkward moment in the grey light of predawn; the silvery field stretched behind them, the shrine in front. Kagome shifted from foot to foot.

"O...kay," she said eventually.

Sesshoumaru stared at her, waiting for her to ascend the steps ahead of him.

She gave him a severe look. "Good day," she repeated, rather more pointedly than necessary.

"Thank you," he said. He didn't move.

"Aren't you going to... you know, go? And have a good day?"

He raised an eyebrow.

"Somewhere else?" she added, her voice tinted with a light exasperation.

Sesshoumaru shrugged. "Eventually," he said. "Right now, I will come with you."

Blinking rapidly at this declaration, Kagome thoroughly failed to get it.

"What?" she said, and he could not tell if she was displeased or merely disbelieving.

"I said that I am coming with you."

She still didn't seem to comprehend his words. "No," she told him, shaking her head as though to clear it. "No, we already went over this - I'm not going to goddamn practice on you!"

He blinked at her. "Why have I gone to all this trouble if you are willing to fail at the last?" he asked. Really, it wasn't that hard to understand at all - he wanted her alive, and Sesshoumaru was not in the habit of not getting what he wanted. Therefore obviously he was willing to do anything to ensure that she stay just how he liked for as long as he liked.

"I'd rather fail than seal you. I told you that."

Sesshoumaru kept his face carefully neutral. "I'd rather you succeed."

"No!"

Frowning, he looked her up and down, taking in the shaking fists and rising color in her cheeks. He had expected resistance - was, in fact, counting on it - but this level of vehemence was almost excessive.

He sighed.

When he landed at the top of the steps of the shrine with a kicking and screaming Kagome tucked under his arm the old woman merely looked at them both before giving a curt nod of the head. Then she strode past him with a purposeful step and descended to the field below.

He followed her.

After a few moments of watching - and yelling - helplessly as events spun out of her control, Kagome informed him of her displeasure over this state of affairs by attempting to hit him in a very sensitive area. Fortunately she only succeeded in bruising her fist against his armor, but nevertheless the blow was an impressive one, and unexpected at that.

Feeling slightly uneasy Sesshoumaru decided at this point that it might be prudent to relocate her; the fact that the impact of her stomach against his armor-plated shoulder effectively silenced her was just a happy consequence.

For a minute Kagome merely dangled limply down his back, but when she regained the use of her lungs he heard her begin to mutter terribly unladylike curses under her breath. The old miko was still walking a few yards in front of him, apparently uninterested in the girl and the youkai behind her.

"You know," Kagome said as they neared the line of trees, "this isn't going to work. You can't force me to shoot you."

"Hn," Sesshoumaru replied, wishing she would be quiet. He knew that.

"And I'm not going to shoot you," she reminded him, just in case he had forgotten.

"Hn," he postulated. He knew that, too.

"What if something goes wrong? What if I purify you?"

Repressing the urge to roll his eyes, Sesshoumaru didn't even bother to answer, simply trudged on.

Feeling increasingly distressed Kagome rummaged around in the depths of

her dirty trick box, desperately searching for something to deter him from this ridiculous fool's mission. That he had attempted on numerous occasions to dissuade her from similar pursuits and met with similar reticence was incidental; clearly this was different because now it was she who was being sensible. When she was being the sensible one it was probably for a good reason, and now he wasn't listening to her.

She thought frantically, her heart racing. "What will all the other youkai think?" she demanded suddenly.

For a moment she thought it might have worked as the youkai lord paused for a fraction of a second, but her hopes were quickly dashed when he continued. "At this point there are no other youkai nearby," he informed her. "I have killed them all."

Which was how she found herself in this position in the first place, and Kagome could not decide whether to curse this fact or feel grateful. It was only eight or so in the morning, and already her entire world had inverted itself, and it wasn't just because she was upside down, nose-to-obi. Biting her lip and staring at the bright yellow fabric in front of her eyes, Kagome searched with mounting despair for something that would dissuade him from this horrible task.

Without warning the world tipped and she was standing dizzily on her feet as Sesshoumaru brushed past her. Kagome turned in time to see Fuyu drop her finger from where she was pointing and Sesshoumaru following her directions to stand in front of one of the trees at the edge of the forest.

It seemed to be happening so quickly. One moment she had been tranquilly crossing the field before dawn and now she was about to put an arrow through Sesshoumaru. She was being swept along, the tide of the universe swift and inexorable. Her fingers itched to grab something, anything, and hold on.

"What if I leave you like that?" she demanded, the frantic feeling of helplessness clawing up her spine. "What if I seal you and leave you?"

"You won't," she heard him say.

Kagome shut her eyes. Arrogant bastard.

It had all gone so wrong so fast. Very quietly, she wondered what deity had it in for her and what she had done to deserve his anger. She could feel the past and the present piling against one another; she could feel her heart running dry.

She opened her eyes again to find the world a blur, and Kagome immediately thought it odd that she hadn't even known that she had started to cry.

Angrily she scrubbed her face before she unshouldered her bow and let it drop to the ground. The distant white figure of Sesshoumaru stood placidly in front of her, and ten feet away Fuyu was giving her that strange, hard look again.

"Girl," the old woman said.

"Shut up," Kagome snarled back.

She was so angry.

How dare you ask me to do this? she demanded, lost in the darkness of her head. How dare you ask me to do this to him?

"I'm not going to. I can't."

"You can and you will."

Everything in her balked. "I can't and I won't!".

Fuyu crossed the distance between them in a heartbeat and backhanded her across the mouth.

Shocked, Kagome brought her hand to her face, felt the dampness of shed tears on her tender skin. With wide, disbelieving eyes, she turned to Fuyu.

The old woman was red in the face.

"You have no time!" Fuyu yelled, and the sharp sound seemed to slice through

Kagome's skull. "Do you understand? You have nothing! You told me you were willing to do anything to defeat this evil, now do it!"

Trembling, Kagome took a step backwards, shaking her head.

For a long moment the old woman stared at her. Then, with determined movements, she removed her own bow and drew an arrow from the quiver on her back.

"Fine," she said. "Then I will use him as a demonstration."

She slotted the arrow and began to draw it back.

"No!" Kagome shrieked, lunging forward. Desperately she grabbed the bow, tried to wrench it out of the old miko's hands, but Fuyu had a grip like the snap of predatory jaws.

"You choose who does it!" Fuyu shouted. "But he is getting sealed, one way or another!" Then her diamond-hard eyes narrowed. "And I'm getting old," she added in a low hiss. "Who knows how much my hand might slip, or what I might do in a second of absentmindedness."

Kagome froze in horror.

"No," she gasped. "You wouldn't."

"Go ahead and tempt fate, girl. Go ahead and toy with all those lives. Choose to take that chance, just like you chose this task. Or did you think it would be easy?"

I don't know! she wanted to scream, wanted to cry. I don't know!

But she was silent. Slowly, Kagome swallowed hard and released the wood clenched between her fingers.

"Your youkai understands," Fuyu said as she drew away. "Do you?"

Dumbly, Kagome nodded.

"Good. Pick up that bow!"

With numb fingers, Kagome did as she was told.

"Now do it."

Kagome nocked an arrow and brought the bow level, drawing the string back to her shoulder.

She stared down the wooden shaft and felt her heart breaking.

Sesshoumaru stared back at her.

There was, in the tiniest corner of his mind, a small, shining fear that she would actually go through with it, but he brushed it aside, dismissing it only slightly uneasily. Really, she'd never given him cause to doubt her; the only reason he was standing here at all was because he knew that her powers always flared under duress - she had told him that herself - and this conflict between her heart and her rational mind would most likely help her summon the power required. From experience, Sesshoumaru knew that once one had the feel of a move, it was much, much easier to duplicate it again.

She just needed to do it once. Then he could start being sane again, not that he wasn't already. Just... even more sane. Yes.

So really, it was fine. Sesshoumaru was almost entirely confident that her tender nature would win out over her self-preservation. The Kagome that he knew would never, in a million years, do anything to injure him.

Of course, she could not know that he knew this, or it wouldn't work. In the pit of his stomach he felt a slight twinge at the emotional turmoil he knew she was experiencing.

His gaze traveled down the trembling shaft of the arrow to her wide, burning eyes. The harsh edge of her breath dragged its jagged edge across his ears.

"Sesshoumaru," he heard her whisper. "Please..."

He felt the quirk of a sardonic smile lift the corners of his lips. She was so

scared, but there was nothing to fear.

Across his mind drifted a vision of his half-breed brother staked to a tree. It had been the work of the priestess who had been Kagome's predecessor.

He thought he might feel history fold back on itself once more, over and over again, but he knew it wouldn't go that way this time. Just like he would not wander the lands in mourning, unable to reclaim his house should it fall, Kagome would not stake him to a tree and leave him there.

Things would be different.

And perhaps, he thought, she was afraid that it wouldn't be.

Teetering on the edge, between success and failure - and both seemed exactly the same as the other - Kagome saw the fractional softening of his face, the tiny melting that she knew only she could see, that he reserved only for her.

She saw him open his mouth.

She heard his voice.

And he said, very gently, as though he were speaking to a child:

"You are not her, Kagome."

She wanted to scream.

Sesshoumaru watched as her jaw clenched, and somewhere behind her eyes he saw some old, badly healed wound tear wide open. He remembered, too, what it felt like to be mistaken for someone else, to stand in perpetual shadow.

So what she said next surprised him.

"Baka," she whispered harshly. "I already knew that."

Kagome fired, and the arrow flew straight and true.

Strangely cold, Sesshoumaru watched it approach.

Then he heard a loud, wooden sound as it hit a tree five yards to his left, and the impact of the seal caused the air to waver so violently that Sesshoumaru would almost have sworn that the small section of the forest next to him, for the briefest of moments, had winked out of existence and then back in again.

Kagome was standing frozen in place as he strolled back to where she stood, trembling.

"That was quite satisfactory," he murmured to her when he reached her. He stretched his hands out and gently peeled her clenched fingers from her bow before letting it drop to the ground. Shaking, she looked up at him.

They stared at each other for a long moment before Kagome punched him in the chest.

"You idiot!" she cried. "You stupid, stupid bastard - what the hell were you thinking? Why did you - what are you - GOD!"

She punched him again.

He frowned at her slightly resentfully before deciding that she was probably under a lot of pressure and should not be held responsible for assaulting his person. He shrugged.

"It worked," he said simply. He was... surprised, but gratified; now that it was over and she had been successful, he thought he might be returning to his senses, which were sensibly suggesting that no youkai, no matter how strong he thought he was, would ever place such trust in a mere human being. His senses were also remarking insistently that he was, as Kagome had suggested, an idiot. By the way, his senses added, he certainly should be at least slightly unsettled to have been so close to a spell of such power, and only an idiot would be so glib about it.

Sesshoumaru told his senses to shut up.

Looking down at Kagome he quirked a brow, as though to ask her what she thought.

She stared at him.

"Yes, it worked quite well," came the voice of Fuyu. Both Kagome and Sesshoumaru turned to see her standing a few feet away, looking at them contemplatively.

Strange, Sesshoumaru thought to himself. He had forgotten she was there.

"Congratulations, girl," the old woman continued, "you performed a seal strong enough to bind almost any demon you choose."

"Almost?" Sesshoumaru asked frigidly. It seemed like a pretty thorough seal to him. Though he would never admit it there was a high, thin shriek of adrenaline weaving its way through his system; were he a lesser youkai, his hands would be shaking at the thought that he had deliberately put himself in the path of such a powerful spell.

"Yes, but that is very impressive," the old woman said. "I bet that seal would have almost worked on you, and if she could seal you she could seal anything."

Satisfied, Sesshoumaru nodded before turning back to Kagome, who was still staring at the old woman with a look of angered anguish on her face. She was upset. He still didn't like that, but it didn't seem to matter - the task was over, and she had succeeded. Her chances of survival were suddenly exponentially better than they had been only an hour ago, and that was what he wanted.

He turned towards the trees again and the warmth of her hand on his chest fell away. He looked back at her where she stood, staring at the ground. She didn't lift her head to meet his gaze.

In a moment of rare intuition, Sesshoumaru concluded that it was time to get out of there before the old woman decided she needed to practice on him some more, or Kagome killed him. As he suspected that both options were very real possibilities, he beat a deliberate retreat into the forest.

Kagome saw, from the corner of her eye, his soft black boots shift on the dry grass as he continued toward the trees; there was only the slightest of rustling sounds as he moved away.

She stood there for a long moment, unsure that she would be able to walk or speak - everything inside her was twisted around and over everything else, leaving her in a painful knot. Her head ached badly.

She heard Fuyu sigh.

"You did well, girl," the she said, the first real praise Kagome had ever heard from the old woman, but somehow she just could not bring herself to take pleasure in it.

"I commend you," the miko continued. "You'll defeat your enemy when you meet him."

"He wasn't my enemy," Kagome whispered in a strangled voice.

There was a pause. "No," Fuyu said, "he is not."

Kagome swallowed around the lump of misery clenched tightly around the base of her throat.

"Why - " she began, then stopped and licked her lips.

"Why... why did you do this to me?"

She could hear the rough, sore edge of her voice, quiet and raw.

There was a silence. In the trees, a small breeze fluttered through the leaves.

"To make you strong," Fuyu replied softly, finally.

Sadly, Kagome nodded.

And that seemed to be all there was to say.

* * *

It was evening, and Kagome was feeling at her least chipper.

She'd spent the entire day feeling miserable, while the hot sun beat down on her back as she pulled weeds out of the vegetable garden. Surprisingly only a small fraction of her misery was caused by the annoying torture of weed-pulling; the majority of it was a direct result of the mountain of fear and regret that had built up in a shatteringly short amount of time since she had almost shot Sesshoumaru with a sealing arrow. Every time she closed her eyes she could see him standing there, looking bored, just waiting for her to get it over with; it was seared into her memory.

Until that very moment, Kagome had not understood how deeply she had drawn him into her heart.

And she had fired. Admittedly she had not fired at him, but - god, what if she had missed? What if her hand had slipped? What if ten thousand things had gone wrong in that moment?

It seemed as though she had used him, and the fact that he had been an entirely willing participant just made it worse; she felt dirty, inside and out, but no matter how much she had scrubbed in the stream she couldn't seem to get herself clean. Even more disturbing, she had sporadically found herself wishing with just a tinge of desperation that she could have spent some time with Kazuo today, and she had very little idea why. The stray thoughts that trailed their smoky fingers through her mind suggested sake and a sympathetic ear, and if it hadn't been for Fuyu's light warnings against that sort of temptation she would have leapt from the garden and run to him for the comfort she needed so badly. Now that she thought she might, perhaps, have an inkling of what strange nightmares might fill his head he seemed... safer. Less volatile, more logical. It all seemed to make a horrible sort of sense in a way that it hadn't before.

Now, curled inside her sleeping bag, she saw Sesshoumaru standing there at the edge of the trees, patiently waiting to be bound. Again and again, she saw the slightest look of surprised fear in his eyes when the spell hit. Over and over, she imagined what would have happened if something had gone wrong.

Why did he agree to such a stupid thing? Why did I let him? The questions chanted on an endless loop. Of course, there had been a certain amount of coercion involved, but that didn't change the fact that she had taken even that tiniest of risks.

For the first time since they had begun to travel together, he had not been at camp when she had returned, and she was pathetically grateful that he had not. She had quickly eaten dinner and dressed for bed, racing for her sleeping bag when she felt a slight swell in the faint, strange chill of his youki. Now he was coming closer.

Kagome shut her eyes.

Sesshoumaru came through the trees.

Pausing just inside the edge of the clearing, he listened to her soft, slightly tense breathing as she lay quite still. She was only distinguishable as a soft mound beneath her blankets, and he knew she was just pretending to sleep. Still, he was inclined to let her continue the charade as an unusually perceptive part of his brain was telling him, very insistently, that any conversation attempted tonight would be awkward. After all, what would they say to each other?

Oh, I say, I was nearly sealed today!

I know, dear. I was there, remember?

Ah, yes, now I do. If I recall correctly, it was you who almost bound me with a spell. How very odd!

Oh, yes, I did, didn't I? Well, ahaha, forgive and forget, I always say!

...Yes, I can see why you would.

No, Sesshoumaru concluded, that would not do at all.

Sesshoumaru bowed his head and brought a clawed hand to his temple, letting his fingers massage the skin there in slow, semi-soothing circles. He tried to think.

After a moment he reached a decision that was not, for a change, a stupid one. He decided, very sensibly, that what they both needed now was a good night's sleep; she was so terribly sensitve that she probably needed to distance

herself from the fact that she had shot an arrow, if not at him, then at least in his general vicinity, and he definitely needed to distance himself from the fact that he had let her do so.

Yes. He had simply stood there, almost entirely confident that she wouldn't go through with it; of course, there had been a tiny doubt, squeaking in the shadowed corners of his head - after all, her predecessor had sealed his brother without a thought - but he had ignored it. He refused to be ruled by such things. Besides, Kagome was not Inuyasha's woman; it stood to reason that she would not act the same. He had counted on that.

In fact, thinking back on it, the amount of trust he had placed in her was actually downright embarrassing, and now that it was over he wondered what had actually been going through his mind. He had never, ever allowed himself to be so vulnerable. What if he had been wrong? The only people in the world who had seen him in a comparative state of weakness had been his father, his mother, and Rin.

He didn't want to think about the things he might have done for any of them, either, though whether he was afraid that he would have done something similar or whether Kagome was unique in that regard, he could not say.

Maybe he had lost his mind.

Very quietly, Sesshoumaru walked to the tree where Kagome was feigning slumber and removed his swords from his hip, setting them as far away from her as possible before he unstrapped his armor. The fire behind him was already dying, but he could see her quite well in the fading light as he went through his evening routine.

Or, rather, he would have been able to see her if her head had not been buried beneath her pillow. Still, he imagined she looked as troubled as he felt.

He was probably as stupid as she told him he was. What had he been thinking? Did he really want her to survive that badly?

He dropped his armor to the ground, heard the soft thump as it hit.

Do I really care that much? he wondered, gazing at the lump of girl swaddled

inside the strange material.

Did he really want to know?

She was going to leave soon - she would go off to battle and either die or go home, but she would not return to him afterwards. Maybe some far off day in the future they would meet again, but their time together was running out, and that knowledge lay cold in his chest, sat heavy on his lungs, restricted his breath.

Abruptly, almost angrily, Sesshoumaru shook his head, as though to dislodge the strangeness that had settled there. It made no difference, of course; all he had done was strengthen the odds that she would survive when he was no longer with her. That was all. He owed her that much, at least.

Almost morosely he lowered himself against the tree and closed his eyes.

Perhaps, he thought, and even in his head the hope seemed merely to be an empty gesture, tomorrow will be better.

Disturbed and unhappy, Sesshoumaru slipped off into troubled sleep.

* * *

In the small, dark hours of the morning Kagome woke up and knew immediately that something had gone terribly wrong.

Her eyes flew open with a gasp and she sat bolt upright in her sleeping bag, her eyes darting around her, flying over the clearing, looking for the danger, looking for the terror that had awoken her.

She could see nothing, even in the dim moonlight. Beyond the clearing nothing moved, and over the pounding of her heart the forest was silent.

Breathing heavily, Kagome slowly and carefully slipped out of her sleeping bag and backed up until she felt herself bump against Sesshoumaru.

"Sesshoumaru!" she hissed quietly, nerves jangling. The sound of the alarm

bells in her head shook her brain, vibrated down her spine.

Behind her, the youkai didn't move.

"Wake up!" Kagome whispered urgently. "Something's wrong!"

There was still no answer from behind her.

She turned clumsily, bumping against him again as she did so.

Sesshoumaru fell over.

In the ghastly silver light of the moon his white clothes were stained black with blood.

An arrow protruded from his chest.

Kagome screamed -

In the small, dark hours of the morning Kagome woke up and this time it seemed real, but the high screaming note of terror in her head drowned out her rationality. Frantically she struggled out of her sleeping bag and launched herself across the small space between herself and Sesshoumaru - who seemed asleep, or dead, or asleep, or dead - and landed next to him, her fingers already fumbling in the folds of his clothing before she was able to rip his haori open and expose his bare chest. Desperately she pressed her hands against his skin in the dark, searching for the wound she knew had to be there.

Groggily, Sesshoumaru reflected that while this was not the first time a woman had awoken him from a deep sleep by tearing his clothes off, this was certainly the last woman he had really expected to do so.

He'd hoped she would, though, just a little. Hypothetically. Now the very unhypothetical sound of her gasping breath sent a flood of warmth from his head to his groin, and Sesshoumaru opened his eyes, suddenly very awake indeed.

Fortunately - or unfortunately, he really couldn't tell which at this point - the look on her face was not one of passion but of terror, and now that he was

fully conscious the silver scent of her fear was permeating the air all around them, both enticing and disturbing at the same time. Nervous and perplexed and entirely unsure as to what was going on or what he should do about it, Sesshoumaru watched as she traced her fingers over his chest.

Her fingertips left little trails of fire where they went.

He heard his own sharp intake of breath at the sensation, and she immediately looked up, her wide eyes and open mouth the picture of shock.

She was definitely not trying to seduce him, which was both a pity, since physically it had worked so very well, and a relief, since it was exactly what, intellectually, he didn't want happening.

She had better have a very good explanation for doing this.

He stared at her intently as she looked for her voice.

"I'm - " he heard her gasp. "I'm sorry! I just..."

She closed her mouth and swallowed hard, her head drooping just a little as she shut her eyes.

"I had a bad dream," she said, a little calmer than before.

Slowly she opened her eyes again, staring at the smooth expanse of his skin beneath her fingers.

"There was so much blood..."

Ah. She'd dreamed he was wounded, and had wanted to make certain that it was not true.

How... disappointing? Touching? Er, how... something...

Thinking had become very difficult - even more difficult than usual, which was quite a feat – so Sesshoumaru gave up and waited for her to realize what she was doing.

Yet as the seconds ticked by she made no move to remove her hand, and, with a strange, delicious despair, he noted that he was growing warmer and harder by the second.

This is a very bad development, he thought distantly.

Sesshoumaru willed himself to push her away.

The seconds ticked by. He stayed still.

The night was very warm, the air was thick, and, high above, the moon shone through the branches of the trees, splashing across her lovely body. He felt compelled to stare, fixated, at what it revealed to him.

She was hypnotic. One strap of that flimsy shirt she wore had fallen down her shoulder, and he wanted to hook one claw into the fabric and pull it down the rest of the way, to expose her body to the moonlight. He ached to taste the silver swell of her breasts, itched to pull her in and rub himself against her, and those delicate little fingers, those delectable, calloused warrior's hands should be exploring his body, tracing across his back, over his hip, down -

No. Stop.

Sesshoumaru swallowed, hard.

Struggling, he tried to think cold thoughts, clinical thoughts, safe thoughts; he was teetering dangerously on a precipice, one that he had known was there but that he had refused to acknowledge in the vain hope that if he ignored the sudden drop, he could walk on air.

It was his own fault, too - the fall was not unexpected, and yet it was unwelcome all the same. He had been avoiding his desire for her for nearly a month - maybe longer, he didn't know - but now that she was so close, so delightfully framed in the glow of the night, so innocently exploring his skin, there was no way he could deny it any more.

He wanted her, badly.

Very, very badly.

And it was all wrong, so very, horribly, terribly wrong. He couldn't have her, was not supposed to want her, and, more importantly, he didn't even want to want her. To want her would be to enjoy her completely, to desire everything, to lose himself entirely. He was already inextricably bound to her in that strange, intangible way of words and thoughts, of honor and debt; to take that final step would be disastrous. To close that one last space between them would be to grow into her, to entangle himself with her so thoroughly that to escape with all of himself would be impossible. He would mourn it; he would regret it so bitterly that he would never return to himself, ever.

To have her, and then to release her - worse hell than never having her at all.

In front of him, Kagome bit her lip and worried it between her beautiful white teeth, and he felt a treacherous ache in his bones; he itched to reach out and run his thumb over the plump flesh of her mouth, soothe away the soreness left behind by her anxiety...

God, but he was truly insane, letting himself entertain the barest of notions of strengthening such ties even further. He had learned his lesson, after all. A human girl had already irreversibly altered him from what he was; he could not let something like that happen to him again.

He could not.

Kagome let her head droop a little further, and her hair fell away to expose the delightful curve of her jaw.

He could not look away. Oh, yes, he desired her, wanted to slide his hands over the dip and curve of her waist, wanted to cup her hips against his, wanted to trace the shell of her ear with lips, teeth, tongue, wanted to pin her beneath him and never let her get up again, but at the same time he loathed his own traitorous body, his traitorous mind that had let this happen. Or maybe he desired her because she was not allowed.

He could not tell if it mattered - either way he had let himself want her, carelessly, and only now did he realize that it was too late to turn back.

And somewhere dark and deep, at the base of his spine, in the forgotten rooms

of his mind, was the part of him that had always refused to be tamed, that had eluded his hard-won self-control. Now he could feel it rise and fall as somewhere within him it breathed a whispered word.

It passed across his mind. Feather-light, shining, it floated by, and nothing he could do would unthink it again.

Perhaps... he thought.

Perhaps this, perhaps that, perhaps he might, she could, they would -

Perhaps.

And, deep inside, Sesshoumaru felt himself take the next step towards ruin.

He closed his eyes.

He had fallen to his father's curse. He wanted a human being, so badly that he might even risk the past again just for a taste of her, just for the unhappy sweetness of holding a dying creature in his arms and making her his own.

She was so brief, and his enemies so very, very long...

They would all know his weakness. For the rest of his life, he would be known as his father's son. Everyone would know.

A frown, unbidden, unconscious, was forming across his brow, and Sesshoumaru, itching for a way out, rebelled. He reached a decision.

Sesshoumaru opened his eyes, and looked at the woman in front of him.

But, then again, what did it matter? He valued his pleasure, for it was so hard to come by, and she was nothing, nothing to him except, perhaps, that it pleased him to want her. And Sesshoumaru always did what he pleased.

And besides, he thought, almost a shade hysterically, wanting was entirely different from having. He didn't have to give in to his own disastrous desire, didn't have to take that final step; with any other female he wouldn't have hesitated, but here, now, with Kagome, he could not. She was too much for

him. Too much. There was just too much, too much danger, too much desire, too much for him to risk himself just for the fleeting pleasure of her body.

But he could want her. There was no harm in allowing himself that.

Before him she sat, looking delectable and forbidden, and there was pleasure in temptation, he knew; there was pleasure enough in coveting.

He let himself want.

She was just so... her. So Kagome. Not beautiful or ugly or anything but herself, and Sesshoumaru could almost see her head thrown back, her face contorted in pleasure, could almost feel her long legs wrapped around his waist as –

"It was me," Kagome said suddenly, breaking into his spiraling reverie.

As if she had snipped his strings, he tumbled back to the earth, confused and disoriented.

Blinking, he tried to clear the red fog from his mind. He licked his dry lips and tried to remember what they had been talking about.

"What was you?" he asked, staring at the slender curve of her lovely throat in fascination.

She still wouldn't look at him. "The one who shot you," she said softly after a moment. "It was me."

The fingers on his chest were restless, roaming.

"You're really not... hurt?" she wanted to know.

The dream. Yes... Sesshoumaru remembered. He shook his head, not trusting his voice.

Her chest rose and fell in a tantalizing sigh. "I'm so, so sorry," she whispered. "I didn't even want to do as much as I did."

"It was necessary," he reassured her absently. The meandering, heated trails

left by her hands were increasingly distracting. His eyes traced one long glossy tendril of hair as it curled over the soft swell of her breasts, barely covered in that flimsy fabric, and he thought, almost giddily, that he would happily give up his left arm again to be that lock of hair.

"I... I don't know," she told him. "When I saw you standing there, I just couldn't... I couldn't stop thinking about..."

He felt something twist in his chest, and he thought he understood.

Slowly, he lowered his head, trying to catch her averted eyes.

"I told you," he murmured, "that you are not her."

Kagome could feel the sound of his words rumbling through his chest beneath her fingertips, and suddenly she was no longer wondering what was a dream and what was real. All those stupid, girlish fantasies that she had entertained because they were safe, because they would never, ever happen were clamoring in her head now, suddenly more real than she had ever thought possible, and they were dangerous.

Oh. God. Her hand was on his bare chest.

Kagome stared at her fingers where they rested on his firm flesh, frozen in place, too terrified by the sudden danger, too frightened by the thought of what she might find to look into his face. Swallowing, she shut her eyes.

"Baka," she whispered, and she heard the note of despair in her own voice, could hear it coloring the night between them with a cold, indigo edge. "You think that's the only reason I didn't want to shoot you?"

There was a long pause, and she could hear him breathing. "No," he finally said, quietly.

Kagome shook her head and began to draw away.

Sesshoumaru caught her hand in his own, and then, without warning, gave it a firm tug. With a soft cry of surprise she fell against him, the fingers of her other hand finding the gentle hollow between the curve of his shoulder and

the rise of his chest. Here his haori was not disheveled, and she could feel warmth seeping through the silk. Her face was mere inches away from his bare throat.

She froze.

Then she felt his hot breath ghost over the shell of her ear and her body melted.

"Why," he murmured darkly, and there was a strange edge to his voice that she couldn't identify, "did you tell me that you knew?"

For a fleeting moment she wanted to ask him what he was talking about, but she could not. She could feel his long, tapered fingers prodding her, probing her heart, begging for her secrets, and of all of the secrets he sought, this was one of the deepest.

This secret was like looking into the darkness, and seeing the darkness look back.

Swallowing hard, Kagome shut her eyes and took a deep breath.

"Because... we were never the same person," she whispered.

A pregnant silence followed.

"I do not understand."

Kagome gave a bitter laugh. "I don't know if I understand," she mumbled. It made sense, and yet it didn't.

"Try to explain anyway."

But how could she tell him? Why did she have to think about the past here in his arms?

Who did he really think she was?

"We never shared the same soul," she said.

Sesshoumaru was quiet for a long moment, before:

"You were her reincarnation."

Kagome opened her eyes and drew back, looked into his smooth, calm face; she couldn't see anything there but curiosity - no judgment, no anger, no disappointment, and she wanted to run her fingertips over the stripes on his cheeks, wanted to trace the curve of his lips. She didn't, though. Instead, she shook her head.

"No I wasn't," she told him. "It was... I was..." Why is this so hard to say? "Her soul was just dormant, in my body."

She gave a small laugh at how ridiculous it sounded, and at how much horrible sense it made. "Supposedly my soul was enormous, much bigger than the soul of a normal person. I thought I might be special or something, like maybe that was where all my power came from, but it was just two souls entwined - hers and mine."

- in her hand the jewel glowed incandescent, and all her fear and hope crowded at the front of her mouth, uncertain and wondering if she would be no more - though she hoped that a small part, oh please oh please oh please, just a small part remembered, if she wasn't - and then something happened -

- across her chest, down through her stomach, a weird peeling sensation, a sudden sense of breath, and then she fit inside her own body, perfectly, felt as though she had unfolded from an unnatural position, felt the liberation of standing and stretching out, of having room -

Miserably, Kagome clenched her teeth.

I was never anything special in my past life. I wasn't destined to love Inuyasha or defeat the enemy or be anything but Kagome. I carried Kikyou and the jewel, and that was all I did.

"We were always separate," she said softly, "so when I made my wish on the jewel, she just... took hers back - " and if we had been the same, would I have died? " - and now I'm normal."

God, she had been so young, and so stupid.

He drew back a little further, was still looking at her with that intense stare, and Kagome found herself yearning to look away, but she could not. He held her gaze for a long moment.

"It was you who made the wish?" he said finally. It was a question, but he murmured it so darkly that it seemed like an accusation.

It was not what she had expected him to say, and she was thrown off-balance. "Y - yes," she replied, uncertainty pulling the world out from underneath her. "Who else would have?"

A cloud passed across the moon, dropping them silently into darkness. The hand on her wrist tightened, fractionally.

"I have always believed it to be Inuyasha." His dark voice rose to meet the night. "Did he not wish for the dead priestess?"

Did he not choose her?

The blood drained from her face. Kagome wavered, lightheaded.

That's right, she thought, slightly hysterically, you weren't there, were you?

Insanely, she wanted to cry, or run, or sleep for years, but Sesshoumaru remained in front of her, shrouded in shadows. She wanted to touch him.

But hadn't she betrayed Inuyasha once already? That, afterwards, he hadn't felt betrayed, or anything for her at all, didn't change that. The guilt was still there; she would always carry it.

All her sins, laid out beneath the sky, and he needed no light to see them. They burned, incandescent.

"No," she rasped around the lump in her throat. "He chose me."

Sesshoumaru felt himself become very still. In his chest something burned, so

coldly he almost shivered, almost lost his iron grip on himself, and the tips of his fingers tingled with the greedy, possessive urge to pull her so close that she would grow into him. It was difficult for him to breathe, as though, with her revelation, she had just chained him to the darkness beneath the world.

So unexpected and unhappily familiar was this angry, crawling feeling that he could not move.

Kagome was too wrapped up in misery to notice the temporary stiffening of his limbs. He loved me, she wanted to say, just so someone else would know that she had been cherished, once upon a time in her life. He loved me. He really did.

And the regret ran so deep she knew the hollowness it left behind would never be wholly filled again.

The cloud skittered off into the corners of the world, leaving the moon behind. Once again she was gazing into golden eyes - those golden eyes that were so like Inuyasha's, and yet they had always been colder and deeper, like the far end of the ocean.

With pale despair, she tore herself away.

And while Sesshoumaru did not like the traitorous possessiveness that threatened to overwhelm him, he liked her pulling away from him even less.

Kagome gasped softly as he tugged her against his chest again, letting her hide from his scrutiny, and he was so immediate. The heat of his body, the smoothness of his skin begged her fingers to close the space between them, but she was too frightened, always too frightened to try. She didn't deserve it anyway.

"And what did you wish, Kagome?" he asked. His voice was alien and rigid, and she suppressed a whimper as his lips brushed against her ear.

- the one selfless wish she could think of, because she didn't wish for it at all, really, hated it, would die inside of it -

"That Inuyasha and Kikyou..." - stupid, horrible wish - "...That they could live,

now, as though Naraku had never happened to them. As if... as if it were the very next day, and Kikyou had given Inuyasha the jewel, and he had made his wish."

And I couldn't wish anyone else back into life, Kagome thought despairingly, because that would make me happy and that would be selfish, and I couldn't erase all the pain, because that would make me happy and that would be selfish, and I couldn't fix anything except that one moment in time...

She hated that wish so much. It had made her so desperately miserable, and two years later her sacrifice was negated; that stupid, stupid curse that had reached out and destroyed everything good and true even when the jewel was gone. Or maybe it had just been bad luck that had taken Inuyasha and Kikyou in a wave of sickness. Either way, it didn't really matter.

Maybe she should have stayed with him and kept fighting to keep it safe, and yet how could she, when as long as it existed it would cause so much pain? Guarding and destroying both required sacrifices, but if it stayed in this world, she would just have to fail once for it to ruin so many lives again. To destroy it was both the harder and the easier sacrifice.

So Kagome did what Kikyou had wanted to do so badly, and tried to erase it from the earth. She hadn’t really known what would happen; she hadn’t known if the jewel would let her die or live, but she had done it anyway, and she hadn't told anyone because she was kind and noble and stupid, and she knew she could do it, because hadn't she done it once before?

Except she hadn't, because she had never been Kikyou.

Always just Kagome, and that was what I wanted, she thought. But I wanted to be a little bit of Kikyou, too. I wanted it both ways.

Perhaps it would not have worked if she had known that; it was of no consequence, though, since what had happened hurt as badly as dying, except that dying only took a moment and this took years.

And now here she was, still caught in time, still living in the past, trying to prove... what?

Sesshoumaru was still silent, still waiting for her to fill the quiet between them. Kagome let out a watery chuckle. "That's it," she said. "That's all there was. What else is there to know?"

She saw him incline his head, just a little, and his silky, beautiful hair slid over his bare shoulder; she stiffened at the sight. Tugging, she tried to reclaim her hand to straighten his clothing, to fix her foolishness - which was what she was always trying to do - but he refused to let her go.

Over the shell of her ear, he pulled a cool, quick inhalation. "And Inuyasha became human," he said, as though it made sense to him now, "and chose the dead priestess."

"No," she said, frustrated, sad. "He didn't choose her. He just... rewound. He remembered me, but he didn't..."

Kagome listened as her voice trailed off, and she sounded far away, even to her own ears. He didn't love me any more. Somehow, it was worse that she had chosen for him.

But it had made him happy, and she had hated him for it and loved him for it, and she just wanted to scream at the unfairness of it all. Maybe he wasn't her destiny, maybe she wasn't his past love, maybe they weren't meant to be, but that didn't mean it didn't hurt.

- he looked so surprised, so shocked to see her standing there, and there was Kikyou, alive and warm and real, and Kagome couldn't do anything but watch as the priestess took Inuyasha's arm and led him away, a strange expression on her face -

- and he turned and looked at his first love as she guided him to her sister's hut, but she did not return his gaze. Instead, Kikyou held the eyes of the-girl-who-wasn't-her, and wouldn't look away, almost as if it would be dishonorable not to watch the falling tears -

And the worst part, the worst part was that only after she had returned to the present did she realize how kind Kikyou had been to her. She had thought the priestess was wary, wanted to get Inuyasha out of Kagome's sight before he remembered that he loved Kagome now, not Kikyou, but that hadn't been it.

Kikyou had looked at her with such compassion. She who had watched the man she loved in life move on led him away, so Kagome would not have to see the same thing.

If only she could hate Kikyou it would be so much easier, but she couldn't, now that she had stood in her place.

There was a silence before Kagome took one deep, shuddering breath. "So that's it," she told him abruptly. "Kikyou was made for Inuyasha, and Kagome was made for wishing."

And here I am, still trying to be something great.

Sesshoumaru said nothing. Then he inclined his head and gave his sardonic little laugh.

She gritted her teeth. "What's so funny?" she demanded.

He pulled her slightly closer.

"And yet you are here."

Frustrated, she squirmed a little, but he just held her that much more securely. "What does that have to do with anything?" she said angrily.

And she could hear the smile in his voice. "Only that wishing alone," he murmured, "never takes one anywhere."

What? she thought. What?

He seemed to sense her confusion, and inclined his head towards her. "You spent all this time trying to outrun her," he said quietly, "but even were none of this true, you still would not have been her."

There was a light prickle of tears behind her eyes. That was supposed to make her feel better?

And yet... maybe. Maybe, for once, he knew what he was talking about,

because even if that wasn't her fate, that didn't mean she didn't have a destiny at all. It just wasn't what she'd thought it was.

Very slowly, Kagome let herself lean in further and further, until her face rested against the curve where his neck met his shoulder. His skin was hot, and beneath it, pressed lightly against her cheek, she could feel the staccato beat of his heart for which no music existed.

Then there was the shivery stir of breath in her hair, and the fingers resting lightly against her back seemed to tremble and glide, tracing a shuddering pattern over her flesh so faintly that it might have been her imagination.

Her mouth had gone completely dry.

Gently, Sesshoumaru nuzzled her hair, trying to command her attention, trying to keep her without holding her fast. He didn't want her thinking of the past when he was now. "You were always yourself," he said softly, his lips a hair's breadth from her ear, pulling her to him without touch. "You were similar, but you were not the same. Surely even Inuyasha could tell that."

Uncertain, Kagome almost - almost - laughed at that, but she could only force a small gasp from her laboring lungs. She just couldn't get enough air -

"Because she was dead, right?" she blurted suddenly, quietly, and the softness of her mouth ghosted against the pounding of his heart. Kagome moved back very slightly and swallowed hard. "She was dead and I was alive."

His skin vibrated with the sound of his deprecating chuckle. "Not that," he murmured. She felt his grip on her hand loosen and then he was trailing the tips of his fingers up the soft inside curve of her arm, slowly advancing upwards to her shoulder. Dizzily, she wavered, falling into him.

"Not that," he whispered again, tracing his fingers against her arm, ever closer, ever nearer. "Even without it, you were not the same. She held the scent of a mountain full of rain. But you..."

He paused, and she heard him inhale deeply. "You were never so dark."

Trails of fire ignited where he touched her, and she felt, in the tips of her

breasts, in the depth of her belly, the sharp, dark burn of need. Almost casually she noticed that she could no longer get enough oxygen through her nose; she could only struggle for air through her open mouth, dragging swift streams of breath against his throat.

His hand reached her shoulder. Slowly he moved it between her shoulder blades and gently pressed her to him.

Kagome's back arched. The aching tips of her breasts suddenly rubbed against his chest, rough and raw through cotton and silk, and she fought the flood of desire between her thighs, fought not to whimper, fought for the innocent thread of conversation that had nothing to do with the sudden, growing insanity of their bodies. And it was insanity. His skin was far too hot, his breath too heavy, his pulse too quick, and she needed to ease the hunger he stirred within her so badly that she couldn't think, couldn't focus, and all she wanted was -

"And me?" she managed. Her tongue was thick around the words. "You never told me. You said you'd tell."

There was a pause, and she felt him sigh into her hair.

And in the moment it took for him to answer her, Kagome felt the past and the future spiral inwards, spiral down, felt all things lost delicately dance with all things gained, until she could no longer tell them apart and they become one and the same.

She wanted to burrow into the air, wanted to fold the moment around them and never leave it.

She wanted to kiss him. She wanted to touch him. She wanted to snake her way between his clothing and his skin, wanted to move, restless and wild, rough and dark, over his body, wanted to crawl inside him, wanted, wanted, wanted, wanted -

He had her, now. She was here again, and Sesshoumaru did not want to acknowledge the dirty satisfaction that brought. She was nothing to him, except that she entertained and tantalized, and that was it, surely.

Swallowing hard, he was skating along the high, treacherous blade of desire; his mouth was so close to her skin that he needed only to part his lips and move across the tiny space between them to taste her, and he wanted it so badly it hurt...

And yet the moment he did, he would not stop. She was warm and needy in his arms, and he was almost certain that he could have her, if he chose, but he had already decided. He could not cross over the border of wanting to having; he wanted her there, but that was all. He was not willing to give any more.

"Tell me," she whispered to him.

He clenched his teeth.

And Kagome thought his body trembled for just a moment, but then he murmured, "Not yet."

Then his powerful hands were turning her, settling her back to his chest and cradling her in his lap and Kagome wanted to both cry with the loss of the building fire and give thanks for the sudden halt to the terrifying flames as he slipped his hands around to rest on her stomach. His embrace was suddenly no longer sexual but comforting as he let her sink back against him.

Already she could not decide whether or not the past few moments - hazy with desire and knowing - had been a dream or not, could not decide whether or not he had reciprocated her wanting with his own. She was so confused.

Restlessly, she shifted in his lap, but his hands kept her in place.

"You should sleep," Sesshoumaru whispered to her, and she thought she heard something in his voice that might have been sorrow or regret, but she was too strung out, too at odds with herself to even try to decipher him.

She wanted to turn around and ask him if he was real, or if she was, but she didn't.

She felt heavy and light all at once, and the thought occurred to her that maybe, perhaps, he felt the same - or worse - than she did. The idea was strangely calming.

Kagome took a deep breath. Gently, she placed a hand across one of his and leaned back against his chest, shutting her eyes. "So should you," she told him softly.

They fell asleep, listening to each other breathe.

tell your stories of fishing and other men's wives / the expansive moments of constricted lives: we have a new champion of the Longest Chapter Yet category! Arg. I am so, so sorry this took so long to get out. Unfortunately, life has caught up with me and I can no longer guarantee a chapter every two weeks. I will, however, try very hard. This story will NOT be abandoned, and I will do my best to get chapters out in a timely manner. Thank you all so much for all the support you've given me. Now, as customary, a few quick notes.

Don't we already know what Kagome smells like?: so many of you asked me about Kagome's scent that I had to go back and look at what I'd written, for fear that I was getting my own story wrong. Luckily, I'm not. Waaaaay back when Kagome and Sesshoumaru were hanging out on the mountain and trying to figure out how to kill Aiko the dragon, Sesshoumaru mentioned that Kagome's scent changes when she uses her miko powers. When she's being all miko-y, she smells like "sunlight on waterfalls." Her normal scent – how she smells the rest of the time - is different, and that is the little 'secret' he is keeping from her at the moment. I apologize - I could have been clearer when I wrote about it, but when I first mentioned the way her scent changed back in chapter 13 and then again on the mountain, it was just a throwaway line, an attempt to get inside Sesshoumaru's head. I never planned for it to attain such significance. Eheh.

Where is Shippou?: Argentina.

And of course, my most heartfelt thanks to Technoelfie for being so kind as to look over this chapter before publishing and gently point out all my mistakes.

Without her, I am but a babe lost in the wilderness, cold and hungry, without direction. At night the ice weasels come.

This chapter is dedicated to Questofdreams, a lovely artist who not only illustrated the final scene of arc two of this fic, but who also draws lots of really hot boys and boy-lovin'. You can't go wrong with that. Check her out on devArt!

And now - on with the show.

Tales from the House of the Moon
by
Resmiranda

Chapter Thirty-Two

pitam se jesam li slobodan znati
kako sam i sam ušao u zemlju svoje propasti.

I wonder whether I am free enough to know
I too have entered the land of my undoing.
- Mario Suško, "The Donkey Connection"

* * *

The first thing Kagome became aware of the following morning was the sharp, unrelenting pain in her neck that had settled alongside her spine and seemed to

flow directly into her brain. This had, perhaps, contributed to the strange dream she had been having moments before she awoke which had involved very large brain-sucking bugs, so in a way the muscle cramp was actually a relief. She could only imagine how thorough of a spoon-beating she would receive from Fuyu should she display even fewer brains than normal.

The second thing she noticed was the fact that she was not in her sleeping bag. This was not nearly as bad as the neck pain, as her sleeping bag had been in constant use for a month or so and thus had begun to smell slightly more rustic than Kagome preferred. Still, it was strange.

Groggily, Kagome attempted to impose some sort of order on the universe.

Neck pain plus no sleeping bag equals... she thought vaguely.

No, no, she decided after a moment, more information was definitely needed. She shifted sleepily. To her delight, this action yielded a new discovery, which was that there was something heavy draped over her stomach.

They finally had me committed! she thought. Why else would she be weighted down to her bed? Finally, someone had taken pity on her.

Except her bed was moving, ever so slightly, a rhythmic bob as though she were on a ship. As she was fairly certain there were no homes for the intriguingly-wired on the ocean, this meant that she wasn't getting a vacation and she still had no idea what was going on. Visual aid was required for this problem.

Warily Kagome peeked from beneath lowered lashes in order to acquire further reconnaissance.

A well formed expanse of throat met her sight.

After a few moments of intense confusion she realized what she was looking at, and the last of her sluggish neurons fired into life. Comprehension dawned.

Oh, she thought.

Well.

Many, many times in her life Kagome had awoken in strange places, but, in all honesty, none had provided a shock comparable to waking up and finding the most powerful creature in Japan cuddling oneself like a teddy bear.

She felt the blood drain from her face, and for a moment she merely sat very still and tried not to move before she carefully retraced the chain of events that had occurred last night.

Had nightmare, she thought, very calmly and deliberately. Woke up. Ripped Sesshoumaru's shirt off. Fondled his chest.

Arg.

Very definitely ignoring the part of her that was disappointed she had not dreamed of a thigh injury, Kagome rather giddily hoped that Sesshoumaru wouldn't bring a sexual harassment lawsuit against her before comforting herself with the knowledge that such things probably wouldn't be invented for another three hundred and fifty years. By then the statute of limitations would most likely have run out, so she was probably safe.

Well, safe from that at least. More memories surfaced.

Oh. Right.

As if subjecting him to mandatory strip search wasn't bad enough, there was still the little matter of baring her soul to him in what was probably an inappropriately erotic manner and then passing out in his lap. Whether she would be able to escape the resulting consequences of these actions without further humiliation remained to be seen. At the moment, she had to extricate herself as quickly as possible.

Except she didn't really want to, since it wasn't bad at all; he was very warm, and very comfortable. She'd slumped a bit to the side while she slept, and now found herself half-cradled in his arm, one cheek pressed against his chest. In fact, it was a very nice sensation, and she would have been tempted to snuggle down further and go back to sleep if two parts of her brain had not started clamoring for attention.

The first section was the place in which all her social norms and mores lived, and it was saying, very insistently, that this situation had the potential to be quite embarrassing and that she should get out of it as soon as possible. Her level of intimacy with Sesshoumaru was not nearly deep enough to allow sleeping in his lap.

On the other hand, the other - probably more primitive - section of her brain was suggesting lasciviously that the gap between her current level of intimacy and the intimacy needed for this position could be very easily closed, and, by the way, doesn't that throat look rather lickable?

Unmentionable parts of her tingled to life. They pointed out that his kimono was loose. Incidentally, they said, it might be quite easy to coax him out of it.

Kagome entertained these options for nearly two seconds before embarrassment at her immodest turn of thought settled in and she shut her eyes once more, rather tighter than necessary.

No! she told herself firmly, struggling not to squirm. No licking! Bad girl!

After she had calmed down a little, Kagome clenched her teeth and tried to think of how to get out of this position without waking Sesshoumaru. If she were lucky she could get ready for the day and down to the shrine without having to speak to him; that would give her an entire day in which to ruthlessly quash her embarrassment and pretend that things were perfectly normal.

First things first, though.

Right, she thought. Step one: remove self from the lap of demon possessing preternatural sensitivity of the nose and ears without said demon noticing. Easy.

Very slowly, she looked up, attempting to assess Sesshoumaru's depth of slumber.

This turned out to be very easy, since Sesshoumaru was staring at her.

For a moment, Kagome froze. Then she turned and buried her face in his chest, hoping against hope that he had been struck blind in the middle of the night, or that he had contracted amnesia, or something.

Be invisible! Kagome commanded herself frantically. Think transparent! Glass! Air! Water! Uh... glass...

Sesshoumaru blinked, slightly confused. For the past quarter of an hour he had been studying her and wondering what to do. On the one hand she looked tired and obviously needed the sleep, but on the other he was feeling dangerously unhappy.

Oh, he hadn't been angry immediately. First, of all the positions in which to wake up, Sesshoumaru felt compelled to admit that opening one's eyes to find a lovely young woman pressed rather intimately against oneself certainly ranked high in the top ten, and so he had felt quite content with the world and his position in it, vague discomfort in the groinal region notwithstanding.

Next, he had felt slightly panicked because he could not quite remember how she had arrived there. This made for a frantic few moments until he dredged up her actions of the previous night from the murky depths of his memory. With that recollection, he then remembered his brilliant logical loophole. Relieved that he no longer had to pretend to himself that she wasn't delectably tempting, Sesshoumaru had found that all was well again.

And if he had stopped there, then all would have continued to be well and he could have simply sat back and enjoyed the all-too-rare sensation of waking up with company, except then he had remembered their whispered conversation, and all the little sparkling secrets she had shown him -

- Inuyasha had not thrown her away, as he had always believed; rather, she had let him go. They had not parted with pain and betrayal, with anger and hatred - she had still loved him, and he had loved her -

- somewhere deep in her heart, a part of her was with him still -

- and it was right about then that he started to get upset.

Now she was awake, and he had worked himself into an internal, frothing frenzy of directionless rage complete with impotent frustration at both his inability to figure out exactly why he was so angry and Kagome's insistence on shifting restlessly in his lap and distracting him from pursuing his line of inquiry.

Her face was still buried in his chest. Impatiently, Sesshoumaru gave her a quick jostle.

Kagome, for her part, was still attempting to move past her initial reaction and was finding herself quite surprised by each moment in which she continued to exist instead of, for example, collapsing into a singularity of mortification. She was not entirely certain that this was a good thing.

At the little shake from Sesshoumaru, she risked a peek up at his face.

He was still staring at her.

"God!" she exclaimed turning back to his chest. "Don't you know it's rude to stare at someone while they're sleeping?"

Beneath her nose she felt his chest rumble with an impatient noise.

"I hardly think," he said haughtily, "that you have any grounds for righteous indignation concerning manners. It is also rude to rip someone else's clothing off.

Especially without their consent."

In her brain, Kagome recoiled. He sounded pissed. She couldn't remember the last time he had sounded so angry.

Well! If he was going to be an ass, she could give as good as she got in that department! Kagome ground her teeth. "I was worried about you, and you had plenty of opportunities to object!" she snapped.

There was a snort. "Indeed. Now, if you are quite finished..." she heard him say. His voice was replete with a weary ennui which said, quite clearly, that finding pure young maidens in his arms was such a regular occurrence that he was growing rather bored with it, and why couldn't they just go away and let him sleep for once?

Well, all right, it probably hadn't said all that, but the sudden sensation of being lifted from the cradle of his legs before being deposited unceremoniously - and slightly painfully - onto her sleeping bag certainly contributed to this impression. He didn't even set her down - merely let her tumble out of his hands and onto the ground.

"Ow!" she grunted, the sharp jarring of her bones against the earth jerking her into full and irrevocable consciousness. She blinked, sleep and contentment now far beyond her reach.

In a moment of clarity, Kagome realized that the time elapsed between catching his eyes and getting dumped like a load of dirty laundry couldn't have lasted more than twenty seconds, which meant that the speed with which her day had turned from fabulous to horrible had probably broken some kind of record. This fact did not serve to put her in a good mood.

Angrily ignoring the sudden bumper crop of aches and pains, Kagome sat up and whipped around, glowering impressively at her companion. Unfortunately it was wasted on him, as so many things probably were; he was turned slightly away from her, making a great show of readjusting his messy kimono.

This just pissed her off even more. It had been one of her better glares. "What the hell was that for?" she demanded angrily.

"You were in the way," he said without looking up. He seemed to be taking more time than strictly necessary in straightening his clothing, as though trying to draw her attention to the results of her unseemly behavior.

Brat, she thought. She felt her frustration spike into the red zone, and she jerked her eyes away from him.

"It's also rude to be cold to someone who's obviously embarrassed enough as it is," she said angrily as she clambered to her feet and brushed the detritus from her clothing. "That's just so... so immature!" She whirled away, hands clenched into fists, and stomped her way to her backpack. Not even bothering to root through it she slung the entire thing on her shoulder and then stomped her way off into the trees in the direction of the stream.

After a short interval Sesshoumaru could hear her small, customary shrieks at the chill of the water. He tried not to think of the fact that she was naked at that very moment, which only served to further frustrate him. Forcefully he finished straightening his kimono and stalked over to where his armor rested against a tree.

It took a little longer than necessary for him to get outfitted for the day - for some reason, he couldn't stop yanking on the straps and subsequently cutting off all the

circulation in his limbs - and so his mood was even more foul by the time Kagome came stomping back. When she arrived she paused and pinned him with a mighty scowl, somehow managing to give the impression that she was making a rude face without actually doing so.

"I'm going to go work my ass off," she announced. "I hope you have a nice day sleeping or scratching yourself or whatever it is you do all day."

"Hunting," he supplied through gritted teeth.

"Yeah, that. You go do that," she snapped, turning her back on him and taking a step in the direction of the shrine.

Sesshoumaru was beginning to suspect that she was not giving him the credit he deserved; of course, no one did, but she seemed to be admiring him far less than usual, and since he was showing remarkable restraint in several aspects of his life at the moment he felt that she was poking his sore spots on purpose. The thought irked him, and he felt a childish flash of malice. Against his better judgment, he opened his mouth.

"Do try not to assault any unsuspecting men on your way there," he drawled, loud enough so that she could hear him and almost succeeding in sounding bored.

He saw her stop in her tracks. Then she wove her hands in her still-damp hair and dropped to the ground in a crouch.

For a brief moment Sesshoumaru felt a flash of concern. Then he heard her take a deep breath before she gave a muffled scream through clenched teeth.

It went on for a while. When she finally stopped, she was breathing hard. Then, with rather more dignity than she seemed entitled to, she rose to her feet and walked away.

Sesshoumaru blinked as she disappeared into the foliage, feeling slightly uneasy, restraining the impulse to inform her retreating back that screaming was also immature.

Happily this concern was banished when he realized what he was doing, and began to feel even angrier. She didn't have anything to be upset about! That he wasn't certain his own rage was justified was beside the point; he was pissed off, and the fact that she had managed to redirect his considerable energy, even for a moment, into a flash of concern and remorse for his childish cruelty just upset him even more. He had a really great fury going, and she had almost distracted him from it. The nerve.

Low in the primitive section of his brain, Sesshoumaru felt the deep, burning desire to kill something. Of course, he always liked killing things, but right now he wanted something to slice up just to relieve the tension. There was just something so satisfying about a dismembered corpse, and besides, hunting tended to occupy the mind and provide an outlet for anger with no direction. He really needed that right now - he needed to wrest his thoughts away from the monopoly Kagome held on them.

The thought brought him up short. He had always been the master of himself. How had he lost control so completely?

When did this happen? he wondered, his anger teetering on despair. When did she take my thoughts from me?

He couldn't remember.

With an inaudible sigh, Sesshoumaru turned his face to the treetops and took off, attempting to outrun the chaos in his head.

* * *

Stretched out beneath one of the larger trees in the courtyard of the shrine, Kagome gazed upwards at its branches as they gently bumped against each other in the strangely cool breeze. It was a calming sight, relaxing and tranquil, and she wondered, with remarkable serenity, whether or not the bird perched directly over her face would choose to drop its blessings in her eye.

On its branch the little bird chirped and rotated where it stood. Kagome found this quite interesting and awaited further developments. After all, receiving an eyeful of bird crap would actually improve her day, so she was looking forward to a positive change in fortune. It wasn't the greatest of leaps forward, but even the feelings of disgust and righteous ire that would be caused by such an event would be substantially better than this horrible, miserable confusion that roiled deep in her stomach.

As if that weren't enough, all of her tension had slid down her spine to coil in the small of her back, and the muscles along the edges of her jaw were sore from the constant, absentminded clenching of her teeth. For some reason, the words "death warmed over" kept creeping along the edges of her head and popping out at regular intervals, as if afraid that she would forget her current state of mind and wanted to be sure she was reminded of it at least once every three minutes.

That wasn't all. Of course not. Topping all of this off, like particularly ignominious salt in her gloomy wound, she was perhaps two more clever comments away

from strangling Fuyu and Kazuo, both of whom seemed to have assigned themselves as her own private peanut gallery. If cynicism increased with age, Kagome had decided, then the combined wit and worldly wisdom of both Fuyu and Kazuo apparently amounted to about seven thousand years of life experience, and neither of them seemed anything less than delighted to share it with her.

It was swell.

They were whispering to each other now, a few meters away. Kagome was doing her best not to listen, as no doubt it would all be in the same vein of their previous remarks and she'd had quite enough of those, thank you. Briefly, Kagome considered standing up and walking off in a huff, but some bizarre, malformed sense of pride kept her where she was. It wasn't her fault that Fuyu and Kazuo were convinced she needed advice.

It was Sesshoumaru's fault. Of course.

This fact was just so obvious that it hardly bore thinking about. Still, just for fun, Kagome thought about it anyway.

Yes, it was all so clear. Her misery had nothing to do with the vague, queasy guilt she felt whenever she thought of Inuyasha, nor was it caused by her deep and profound humiliation when she remembered that she had told Sesshoumaru - who was never very sympathetic even at the best of times - some of her deepest and most painful secrets. And of course her state of mind had nothing to do with the perilously deep and probably unrequited feelings that she had allowed to take root even though she knew better. None of that had anything to do with it.

Nope, it was all Sesshoumaru's fault, because...

Well, it just was, dammit.

Kagome bit her lip and shifted on the gritty stones beneath her as she tried to maintain this conviction, but after a few minutes she gave up and just stared glumly at the tree branches again noting absently that the bird had been joined by two of its closest associates. They were chattering back and forth to each other, possibly discussing various aerial formations, and determining which one would lead to the most pleasing poop patterns. It didn't matter, of course; she couldn't be bothered to move even if she was directly in the line of fire. She was used to being shat upon, or at least it seemed that way.

In fact, everything seemed to be conspiring to turn her into an apathetic blob of miserable miko, especially her so-called mentors. Weren't they there to encourage her and help her figure things out? Because if so, they were doing a terrible job and should be fired post haste. Besides, she had been doing just fine sorting it all out for herself that morning, or at least she had been sorting it out with slightly less humiliation.

Admittedly when she had still been on her way to the shrine, she had been in a bit of a tizzy, trying to sort out the myriad of feelings that had buffeted her from all sides, each clamoring for her attention. Anger, rejection, misery, and even a tinge of sexual frustration had warred for dominance as she tramped through the forest to the field, and to her chagrin rejection had won the first round.

Staring unseeingly at the path ahead of her, Kagome had miserably mulled over the events of that morning.

He just walked off, she thought. He'd shoved her aside, insulted her, and walked off, just like that.

Had it been something she had said last night? she wondered. Something she did?

Did she repulse him? It didn't make any sense, he hadn't been cold - no, not at all - when he turned her in his arms, he'd never given any indication, and she was not going to cry -

Desperately Kagome clenched her teeth and concentrated on the little trail she had worn down over the course of the month, struggling to clear her head, trying to slow her breath and keep herself inside.

Still the thoughts beat against her mind, like insects at the window.

She couldn't stop remembering it - he'd just walked off, as if the night before hadn't happened. And nothing had happened, except it had, and he shouldn't have just left -

Except she was right the first time - nothing had really happened between them. Even though she found the experience to be more raw and more electrified than she had ever imagined possible, it didn't necessarily follow that Sesshoumaru would feel the same way about it. Perhaps her head just wasn't clear enough to understand...

As she reached this conclusion, Kagome stepped from the line of trees and into the large field in front of the shrine. The sky was overcast this morning, but the slowly rising grey light was still stronger here in the open air instead of in the gloom of the forest. Kagome felt a small flash of annoyance at the hokey symbolism of the moment before frowning and stepping with determination into the wide expanse of grass.

O-kay, she thought carefully, let's try being rational about this.

Luckily, it only took her about a half a second to come up with a viable way to

reconcile the difference between her reaction and the reality of the situation.

She was overreacting.

Kagome took a deep breath and rolled the hypothesis around, testing its weight. It seemed to have some merit.

Overreacting. Yes. She must be. It wasn't like their relationship had suddenly changed just because she wanted it to do so, and aside from confessing deep secrets and painful life events and then falling asleep in his lap after forcing him into a state of dishabille, there was nothing to indicate that any sort of line had been crossed.

Haha!...

Ugh.

By the time she reached the steps she was beginning to get angry again, though she wasn't certain how much of it was justified, and she was acutely aware that anger was a luxury. She didn't have time to be upset. She didn't have time to obsess over stupid shit.

We don't have time to care about stupid, stupid youkai or stupid, stupid feelings for said youkai, she reminded herself. That is not what we are here for. We are here to save Edo, not...

Well. You know.

Right?

Right.

There was a long pause in her thoughts as Kagome deliberately stuffed her silly fantasies in a mental cupboard, placing them out of sight so that she would not dwell on them any more and could calm down. When she was about halfway up the steps, she experimented with thinking again.

It didn't appear to have worked. Stupid, stupid Sesshoumaru, she thought fiercely.

That stupid bastard. Stupid, stupid, stupid! she thought as she stomped the rest of the way up the steps.

God! It served her right. She was always forgetting that he wasn't human, that he didn't feel the same things she did -

- his father did, her mind whispered treacherously, his brother did -

- and even if he did he probably wouldn't even recognize them -

- what about Rin? -

- or something.

Kagome reached the top of the steps and slowed her pace, wondering if she was rationalizing this just a little too much, if she was letting her offended feelings

govern her too much. It was not unheard of for her to flip out over things that perhaps did not warrant it. In fact, such things had been, she shamefully acknowledged, a regular occurrence when she was younger.

But I'm an adult now, right? she thought. I should handle this like an adult.

Oh, if only she knew how adults handled things! Deep inside, she still felt sixteen, still felt at that age when her life had ground to a halt, when the well had closed, when all of that was suddenly behind. It was so depressing.

All right, she thought, scowling at the ground passing slowly beneath her feet, let's try to think about this in another way. What if? Maybe...

What if she had made him uncomfortable? She couldn't really remember a time when he had seemed embarrassed - angry, yes, injured pride, yes, embarrassed, no - so she wasn't certain what embarrassment looked like on him. Maybe he didn't like other people seeing his discomfort. Maybe he had never been embarrassed before and didn't know what to do about it.

Hey, maybe he just didn't realize what a jerk he was.

Kagome was so wrapped up in her own little world that she didn't even notice the figure in the shadows as she passed by.

"Girl!" The sharp voice of Fuyu sliced across her tumultuous thoughts, effectively severing the unproductive thread of thought that she had been following. Barely suppressing a shriek of surprise, Kagome halted clumsily.

"Um! Ah - eh?" she said, whirling around to where the old miko stood, only a few

feet away and slightly obscured by the shadows of the trees and the shrine wall.

Kagome saw Fuyu's eyes narrow fractionally.

"Are you all right, girl?" the old woman demanded.

For the second or third time that day Kagome was sent reeling. "What?" she said, startled, momentarily forgetting her woes. In her experience, Fuyu was more likely to burst into spontaneous song with assorted forest friends than express unprompted concern about anyone. It was unnerving.

The old woman's eyes narrowed further. "It wasn't that youkai was it?" she snapped.

"What?" Kagome said again, thoroughly lost. "What wasn't him?"

For a long moment Fuyu just stared at her, and Kagome had the unpleasant impression that the old miko was attempting to bore a hole in her skull with the power of her mind, until abruptly the old woman jerked into action, striding forward into the grey light with such purpose that Kagome took a step sideways, certain that she was about to be knocked over like a bowling pin. Unfortunately the old miko merely changed course and walked right up to her and shoved her face upwards, until their noses were almost touching.

"What," Fuyu said, her voice filled with a hard, rough menace, "did he do to you?"

Kagome took a step backwards. "What?" she cried. "What are you talking about? He didn't do anything to me!"

There was a pause while the old miko glared at her a little more, seemingly for dramatic effect, before nodding her head curtly, as though some fundamental piece of a puzzle had suddenly dropped into place.

"I see," she said solemnly. "That is a problem."

For a split second Kagome floundered before realizing that she had missed a turn somewhere.

"What?" she said for the fourth time. It seemed the only coherent response, though she found it deeply annoying that it was fast becoming the most used word in the Kagome Lexicon.

But Fuyu was rubbing her chin sagely. "I think you should take it a little easy today - no wonder you're in a bad mood," she said airily. "Not that I blame you," she added with a slightly unsettling smirk.

Stunned, Kagome was not sure which statement to tackle first: the insinuation that she looked bad enough to warrant a day off, the assumption that it was Sesshoumaru she was obsessing over, or the rather disturbing implication that Fuyu had actually given Sesshoumaru more than five second's thought and that not all of those thoughts were negative.

Steeling herself, she went with the path of least resistance.

"Do I really look that bad?" she asked.

Fuyu raised an eyebrow. "Of course you do! You question my judgment?"

"Uh, no!" Kagome said hastily, belatedly registering the words 'take it easy.' "It's just... um..." She waved a hand vaguely. "What makes you think my, uh, bad mood -" boy, is that an understatement, she thought, " - has anything to do with Sesshoumaru?"

Sesshoumaru? Upset me? she mentally cried. It is to laugh!

The miko looked at her as if she were stupid. "Well you're always so damn upbeat," she snapped, "so something had to have happened this morning or last night, therefore it must have been that youkai who did this."

Kagome scowled, annoyed. It was true, but that was not the point. It might not have been. "And you didn't stop to think that it had anything to do with your little 'training session' yesterday? That wasn't exactly the most brilliant of plans, you know."

Fuyu made a rude noise, as if bad ideas were something that happened to other people. "Nonsense!" she said, throwing her hands into the air. She turned smartly and began to walk across the courtyard toward the shrine. "If anything that should have strengthened your bond, and if you can't even get that right it has nothing to do with me!"

"Our 'bond' didn't need to be strengthened," Kagome snapped, stumbling after her.

"Which is why you're in such a lovely mood this fine morning!"

Ouch. Taking a deep breath, Kagome prayed for patience. "Look," she said, "I

don't know what you think you know about me, but you don't know as much as you think."

"If you don't know what I think I know, how do you know I don't know as much as I think?" Fuyu shot back without skipping a beat.

In the five seconds between the middle of the courtyard and the door of the shrine Kagome managed to work out the last bit of their exchange, but could think of no snappy comeback. Just as well, she thought gloomily - the window of opportunity for a clever reply had passed, and she would only look foolish - more so than she did already - trying to recover it. She shook her head as Fuyu held up a hand, indicating she wait as the old woman disappeared inside. A few moments later she returned, carrying a basket in her hands and sporting the little determined gleam in her eye that foreshadowed a purification of the weeds in the garden. "So," Fuyu said imperiously, "am I right? Your youkai upset you?"

"He's not mine," Kagome sighed.

Fuyu sniffed. "That is completely irrelevant," she said. "The only important question right now is this: am I right?"

Determined to make a valiant last stand, Kagome lifted her chin defiantly. "I really don't see how any of this is your business," she said haughtily.

Then, to her everlasting dismay, the old miko broke into a grin. "I knew it!" she cried. "Now let's go sit in the garden. You look awful." Without another word she swept off, towing Kagome in her wake.

They spent the morning in the garden in silence, Fuyu industriously pulling weeds and squishing giant insects between her fingers while Kagome half-heartedly

plucked at the invading plants and occasionally flicked a pillbug over into another row of radishes. She didn't have the heart to kill them today.

Strange, but her little argument with Fuyu had actually calmed her down somewhat. The old miko hadn't been terribly off base, but she had arrived there from the wrong direction.

Iit was now gradually occurring to Kagome that she couldn't really talk about this situation with anyone because they didn't understand Sesshoumaru as she did, and that classification probably included Sesshoumaru himself. Even with Inuyasha she could talk to Sango or Kaede or Miroku or even Shippou, but now there was no one. She was going to have to get through this on her own. Part of that 'growing up' thing, she supposed.

She was still moodily pondering these small revelations at lunch when Kazuo slouched his way into the main building and informed Kagome that she was late for training.

"Kagome is not going to train today," Fuyu decreed. "She's not feeling well."

"She doesn't look sick," Kazuo said dubiously. "What's wrong with her?"

It was as if she wasn't even there. Kagome opened her mouth to protest this conversation, but to her despair Fuyu ignored her, steamrolling right over her barely voiced objections.

"Her spirit is ill!" the miko declared, waving her chopsticks for dramatic effect and consequently flinging a piece of fish into the air. Fuyu, caught up in the throes of melodrama, appeared not to notice. "She is sick in her soul. She suffers from a malady of the heart!"

Kagome's face burned, but under the embarrassment she couldn't help but think, Sick in my soul? A malady of the heart? Where the hell did that come from? She was beginning to suspect that, buried deep under her crusty exterior, Fuyu might possibly be a romantic. Or maybe she was just a sadist posing as a romantic. Yes, that made more sense.

Over the humiliated groans in her head she heard Kazuo grunt.

"Eh?" he asked.

She saw the old woman lean towards Kazuo with a conspiratorial air.

"Her youkai," Fuyu informed him in what she probably thought was a whisper.

Kazuo blinked, then rounded on his pupil. "The youkai? What did he do to you?" he half-yelled, a thunderous frown crossing his normally genial features.

ARG! Kagome decided. Frantically she waved her hands, trying to placate him. "Nothing!" she cried. "He didn't do anything to me!"

"Nothing?" Kazuo demanded.

"Nothing!" she squeaked, shaking her head with vigor.

Kazuo pursed his lips for a long moment before nodding sagely.

"I see," he announced. "That is terrible."

"That's what I said," Fuyu replied.

Horrified, Kagome buried her face in her hands and prayed that Sesshoumaru was not in the vicinity. Damn youkai hearing, she thought with despair, and for one wild moment she considered upending the kettle of stew in front of her and escaping in the ensuing confusion. Unfortunately this was not an option, as she appeared to be paralyzed by shame.

"You know," Kazuo was oozing, "if you need some male attention, I'd be more than happy to - "

"Oh, get off it!" Fuyu cried, cutting him off and sounding a bit more like her normal bossy self. "She doesn't need someone like you!"

"What, human?" Kazuo said snidely.

"Washed up," the old woman snapped back.

"Ha!" the samurai barked.

"It's not - " Kagome began to say, but it was too late.

"Those that can't," Kazuo was saying, "uh... Those that can't... um, don't."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" Fuyu demanded.

The samurai sniffed. "Miko," he said.

There was a pause. Kagome watched the approaching headlights with a serene terror. As if the day hadn't been bad enough already...

"I am well aware of what she needs," Fuyu growled.

"Yeah, I'll bet," Kazuo muttered.

" - and," Fuyu continued as if he hadn't spoken, "it's not some drunk soldier."

"'A sickness of the soul?'" Kazuo reminded her. "As if you would know! What she needs is - "

"I was merely putting a nice face on it," Fuyu said primly, interrupting him. "I didn't want to embarrass her."

Oh, for god's sake.

"I'm out of here," Kagome announced.

"No, you're not," Kazuo said, rounding on her. "You have to train."

"No training!" Fuyu half-shouted, throwing down her chopsticks in favor of the

spoon and brandishing it menacingly.

"Stop that," the samurai snapped at her. "Nothing physical." He turned back to Kagome, who was willing to do almost anything to get out of that room. "You remember your strategy?"

"Uh... yes?" Kagome ventured. She did remember. She wished she didn't. It involved a lot of disemboweling. Ugh.

"Right! Go find a tree to sit under and meditate on it."

"Meditate?" Kagome almost said, but thought better of it. Instead she ducked out just as Fuyu laughed unkindly and accused Kazuo of being too hungover to do anything but sleep it off under a tree. She hadn't stuck around to hear Kazuo's retort.

It was now nearly evening and Kagome had managed to spread a lot of the blame for the situation around. It might even have been mostly her fault.

Or all her fault. Sesshoumaru didn't owe her anything; she didn't have a right to requited feelings.

She sighed. Kazuo and Fuyu seemed to have reached an agreement, and were now sitting under a nearby tree and discussing the Kagome-and-Sesshoumaru relationship in half-audible tones. From what Kagome could hear, they were getting it mostly wrong.

Well, that made three of them. At least.

A flurry of movement high above drew her out of her miserable musings. Her little bird friends were flying off, taking her hope for a better future with them.

Kagome closed her eyes and began to compose a dramatic and moving soliloquy on her poor fate, rejected and ridiculed and not even worthy of being birdcage liner. There were lots of 'woe!'s and many 'alas!'es. She even threw in an 'alack' just for flavor.

She was debating between ending the whole speech on a couplet or simply a declaration of despair when someone nudged her in the ribs and Kagome opened her eyes to see Kazuo standing over her, poking her with a toe.

Why can't anyone just let me lounge around? Kagome wondered unhappily. Someone was always giving her a rude awakening of one kind or another, and it was getting tiresome.

"What?" she demanded wearily, looking up at her sensei and wishing he were too drunk to talk, let alone bother her. Unfortunately - for her, at least - he seemed to be uncharacteristically sober, though this did not necessarily incline him toward a more sober attitude.

Kazuo ignored her tone. "I said meditating, not sleeping," he informed her as if he didn't constantly make up stupid excuses for his own frequent forays into the land of the unconscious.

"I was," Kagome replied, "but then someone interrupted me."

The samurai just twisted his lips in a strange look that was half amusement, half exasperation. Kagome thought this was pretty rich. "Anyway," she continued, "it's

not like you could tell the difference between the two just by looking at me."

Kazuo merely shrugged. "True," he said. "I suppose you know best how to spend your training. I'm not the one going to fight, after all."

Though she had never been a violent girl, Kagome took this opportunity to imagine Kazuo's head exploding in a rather spectacular manner. The vision came disturbingly easily.

"That's not fair," she complained, "I'm just not very good at imagining disemboweling someone. I've never done it before."

"All the more reason to imagine it a lot," Kazuo sniffed. "Then you won't be so distracted when you're actually trying to get the job done."

Kagome didn't feel like arguing, so she merely nodded as she sat up and began to brush herself off. Unfortunately, Kazuo didn't buy her acquiescence.

"Look, miko-san," he said sternly as she batted ineffectually at her clothing. "You need to start concentrating on your battle."

"I know," Kagome replied with a sigh as she bent and shouldered her backpack. "It's just..." She trailed off.

Just what? she thought absently as they walked to the top of the shrine steps. Just... I don't want to kill anyone? Just I'm tired of blood? Just I didn't really think this through? Just I'm risking my life for an unrequited infatuation?

Just I'm a fool?

They were all true. Kazuo, who could be depressingly sharp at times, seemed to hear her unspoken words.

"Miko," he said as she started down the stairs, "if you are not in this all the way, to win, why are you here?"

Kagome stopped, mid-step.

"I am in it to win," she told him without looking back.

She waited for a moment, in case he had anything else to add, but when it became apparent that he was going to remain silent, she continued down the stairs and into the field below.

I am in this to win, she thought again as she walked across the meadow to the trees. I just don't know if I want to win it like this.

But then again, if she had doubts about her method, why was she doing this at all? It was a very good question, all things considered. Why did she bother? Why, of all the things in the world that she could be, did she always think she had to be self-sacrificing and noble? She could, she supposed, blame it on her personality, which was dutiful and ethical - if she weren't so self-sacrificing, she wouldn't be Kagome, and all that other feel-good stuff her mother told her when she was younger - but that would assume that it was her duty to throw away all the things she wanted and needed, and that she had no will to choose.

And she didn't really believe in fate any more. Not after what had happened with

Inuyasha, at least. But, then again, why had the well let her through? What was she doing here with Sesshoumaru? What the hell was she trying to prove, and to whom?

Around her feet, Kagome watched tiny white insects fly up and out, almost brilliant in the gloomy grey light; it were as though she were casting sparks with her steps that faded and disappeared as she walked into the darkness of the forest.

She just couldn't make sense of any of it, and it frustrated her to no end. She felt as though she had blinders on; she knew there were answers to her questions - all of them, about both her mission and her tumultuous feelings - and yet they were always partially blocked from her view. Here and there she could catch a glimpse, but the whole picture, the true form of the story, always remained fragmented and incomplete; she could never catch enough of it in her sight to understand what it meant.

Chewing on her lower lip, Kagome was so deeply immersed in fretting that she almost didn't notice the sudden hush in atmosphere as she walked further into the woods. Things were getting quieter and quieter, and when she finally noticed the howl of the hush, it was almost too late.

Storm, was her first, incoherent thought, and then suddenly a terrifying cold pierced her throat, flowed down over her lungs and into the pit of her stomach, and she shivered violently with the force of it.

Youki.

The word flapped wildly in her head, beating frightened wings against the inside of her skull - unfamiliar, not him, youki, youki - and then her bow was no longer slung across her back but in her hand, an arrow nocked and readied. She couldn't

remember doing any of that.

Her eyes were wide and dry. She almost panicked, almost swung about wildly, but instead Kagome forced herself to concentrate before whirling around, a near half turn, and pointing her blazing arrow into the darkness beyond the path.

"I can feel you there!" she said loudly, with a confidence that almost seemed real. "Come out, now, or I'll shoot!"

In the silence, a branch snapped. It sounded like the breaking of a mind.

"You will fire?" a voice said, amused. It was unfamiliar, felt dark and warm and soft. In other circumstances, it would have been a calm and comforting voice, but here, on this isolated path and the chill of youki with killing intent slowing the blood in her veins, it didn't sound soothing at all. It sounded like the inside of a grave.

Her breath came in fast, quick pants, and she struggled not to hyperventilate. If you faint, you die, her mind hissed. The goosebumps on her skin tingled.

Swallowing, she lifted her chin. "I don't need to see your face to kill you," she replied.

There was a rustle, and a footstep.

Then, onto the path, eyes trained on her arrow in dark amusement - but he's wary, she noted absently - stepped a handsome demon. Wildly, strangely, her mind carefully catalogued everything about him, as if she wanted to ensure that he would be the same when they met again inside her nightmares.

Pointed ears and dark brown eyes, and features that were a little rough; like Kouga, but burlier. He wore simple armor, a dark blue kimono and loose hakama, and there was a pelt of brown fur wrapped around his waist. Chin tilted in arrogance, as though he knew that this was all a misunderstanding, and things would be fine if she would just listen to him.

Lifting his eyes from her arrow to her face, the demon grinned, displaying teeth so long and sharp it was a surprise he didn't pierce through his own lips.

"Ah," he said, that strange, chocolate-coated voice flowing from his tongue, "at last I am able to meet milord's whore."

Kagome felt the world go numb.

* * *

Sesshoumaru was not jealous. He knew this because he told himself so.

Definitely, definitely not jealous. Not at all.

Anyway, even if - purely hypothetically - he was jealous, he didn't have time to think about it. He was hunting. He was focused and ready, his predator's mind trained solely on the task set before him, and the world narrowed down to the scent and the chase and the blood -

On the other hand, Sesshoumaru admitted gloomily, this excuse would have more weight if there were actually anything to hunt. Still, sooner or later, something suitable for killing would come along and so he was staying staunchly vigilant. He was certainly not distracted by occasional waves of possessive fury, because being jealous of his stupid, annoying, filthy half-breed brother was such a ridiculous notion that it deserved no further consideration than a disbelieving laugh.

Loitering on the limb of a particularly majestic beech tree, Sesshoumaru gave the surrounding area a surreptitious glance, and then laughed as derisively as possible to see if it dispelled the nonsensical notion that he would harbor any jealousy towards the hanyou. Unfortunately, it was growing ever more difficult to ignore the fact that he was testing this method of dismissal for the seventh time and it had yet to work in the expected manner.

To his annoyance, this newest attempt yielded the same poor results; instead of setting his mind at ease he merely felt silly. If anyone caught the Lord of the Western Lands sitting around in a tree and giggling to himself -

Well, all right, he would remove their capacity for speech very quickly, but it was the principle of the thing.

Sesshoumaru ground his teeth and acknowledged that it was probably time to try something else. He could still feel the strange, cold-burning fog gathered at the base of his throat, and he was running out of theories as to what it could be, since it certainly wasn't jealousy.

Jealousy.

Ha! he thought to himself. Ridiculous!

Yes. It was ridiculous. Not just because the hanyou didn't have anything the great Sesshoumaru would ever want, but because being jealous of him would be almost like admitting that the half-breed could possibly be within shouting distance of his level, and that was such an absurd idea that it was actually insulting. If it were true, he would have growled out loud.

But he didn't, because it wasn't true, so clearly he wasn't jealous, and if he wasn't jealous there was no reason for him to be thinking about this at all. Which he wasn't, because he was busy hunting.

Right.

Sesshoumaru stood on his tree branch and tried to focus.

A long minute passed.

Another long minute passed.

Across the small clearing below, the unseasonably cool breeze whispered through the sparse grass, sending a handful of fallen leaves tumbling. They jostled and chased each other over the parched ground.

Sesshoumaru watched them until they had mostly disappeared into the shade beyond the trees. At that point his eyes began to water; he had forgotten to blink.

Okay.

So maybe he was a little distracted.

That didn't mean he was jealous. He could just be... envious.

...Yes, he decided after a moment, that was acceptable. Envy could imply covetousness, a desire for something that someone else possessed. No, even better, something that someone else was unworthy of possessing. Like Tessaiga.

Maybe even like Kagome, which would explain a lot, actually. Such as, for instance, the inexplicable anger that had overwhelmed him that morning before he had dumped Kagome out of his lap, hastily dressed, and then took off into the forest, running without direction until he accidentally stumbled upon some bears, which he then, in a fit of agitation, turned into ex-bears. Envy could certainly have something to do with that.

It wasn't until after he had created a number of ex-animals that he had calmed down enough to think rationally about the situation. Unfortunately he had been dancing around the idea of jealousy the entire day and had therefore made very little progress, instead choosing to pursue a number of other, increasingly unlikely causes for his discombobulation.

But now - now he had finally found an acceptable variation on the theme of jealousy. Who cared what had transpired between Kagome and that stupid, ugly hanyou? Certainly not him, that was for sure! Clearly Inuyasha did not deserve Kagome - he hadn't deserved much, really - and this covetousness was merely his sense of justice, of balance in the universe, asserting itself.

So he was not jealous. He was envious. There was a difference, albeit not much of one, but then again he had grown quite good at making extremely fine distinctions between his situation and... well, his situation and something else. He was no longer certain as to what particular fate he was struggling against, but it must be unpleasant or he wouldn't keep fighting it so fiercely.

Sigh.

Slowly, Sesshoumaru lifted a hand and rubbed it over his brow, suddenly feeling exhausted. He had never been one to run from anything. True, sometimes he made temporary, strategic retreats, but unless he achieved what he wanted in some other fashion he always came back and finished the job after he had stopped bleeding.

However this was a different feeling altogether - this strange, almost instinctive aversion to whatever fate he felt himself falling into was unsettling. There was a wild restlessness in his feet, urging him to run somewhere, though where he would go, or if he would flee or give chase, he could not tell. It wasn't powerful enough for him to seriously consider giving it to it, but it was a persistent tickling in his limbs, growing fractionally stronger the closer he came to whatever it was he was avoiding.

It was all right, though. As long as he kept whittling down hairs he could postpone whatever it was indefinitely; therefore there was nothing to do but renew his determination to stay his asymptotic course. Logically there would always be a halfway point between his fate and himself, so there was always a place to draw a new line.

There. Problem solved.

Good thing, too, Sesshoumaru reflected, as now it was nearly nightfall and he had accomplished very little today, numerous corpses of relatively inoffensive animals notwithstanding. It was nice to know that those meandering trails of logic had finally lead somewhere productive, or at the very least they had led somewhere where it was finally possible to be productive without all those inconvenient feelings and worries getting in the way of doing things. He really needed to stop

thinking about things so much or he would never get anything done.

It was almost time to go back, anyway, though Sesshoumaru had already spent so much time thinking about Kagome and what had happened that he didn't really feel like he had left her at all. At least he wasn't so agitated any more; perhaps they could have a calm, relaxing evening tonight instead of the angry morning they had parted on.

With a deep sigh, he turned toward camp and -

- paused.

On the air... there was... something...

Smoke.

Sesshoumaru inhaled.

Yes, the smell of smoke was definitely tickling his nose; to a human being it would smell like a normal fire, carried on the wind, but to him there was a sharp edge to the scent, like the sound of a sword, revealing its true nature.

Suddenly, the world tipped over, and just like that all his ridiculous obsessing over Kagome seemed exactly like what it was - silly and pointless - because his true purpose for being here, the real reason he was so tangled and dark inside, had suddenly reasserted itself.

Ah, he thought, narrowing down his mind.

A youkai. He could smell it.

An elemental had come for her, though he had never expected a fire youkai to be so foolish; their smell was so distinct that even lesser beings could pick it out, leaving them an especially open, exposed target for one such as he.

It was a potent scent, too. Her assassins were getting stronger, had been getting stronger, really, since the very first one he had killed.

The boldness was beginning to get rather worrisome, and, as he stood very quietly on his tree branch and tested the air, Sesshoumaru absently wondered for the millionth time how his home was faring. He'd not heard a word from Myouga in all the time he'd been here with Kagome, and the feeling of dread that had settled in his gut was slowly curdling.

The day was clearly fast approaching when he would be forced to leave and return home, to face all the turmoil that waited for him there. Already the inner turmoil that raged inside him was beginning to pale and fade next to the coming struggle, though he knew that it would not disappear, merely slumber until the outward danger had passed and then wake once more.

But that was in the future, and right now, not for the first time, he wondered if all of this was actually worth it. It always seemed worth it when he was with her, of course, but right now, sniffing out the scent of flame, he wasn't quite certain that he was doing the right thing. Was there even a right thing to do? Or did it all come down to him and what he chose to be right?

Soon he needed to return and sort things out. Very soon.

Grinding his teeth at the thought he turned his nose to the wind and inhaled, drawing the acrid scent deep into his lungs. Closing his eyes he concentrated, feeling the breeze wash against his face.

There. To his left. Not far, but moving toward the shrine, and definitely hunting. With a small, silent curse, he leapt from his branch and hurtled upwards, striving for the air above the treetops where he would make less noise and his scent would be scattered.

Breaking through the treetops, Sesshoumaru relaxed slightly. The leafy forest pulled away from him, leaving only the queer light feeling of weightlessness in his abdomen. Paradoxically this was one of the few times he could relax. With something strong to track and kill, he had a purpose; waiting did not suit him. Taking another deep breath, Sesshoumaru allowed himself to find comfort in the hunt, in the familiar carving of his mind down to a sharp point, intent only on his prey.

Sliding on the blade of the youkai's scent, he launched himself forward, leaving himself and all his tangled thoughts behind.

Nothing but wind and the dimness of the forest below, nothing but the heavy evening light settling across the grey landscape, nothing but the scent, closer and closer, stronger and stronger, and -

- there, only the faintest of flickers, and he had found the youkai. He cracked his knuckles and readied his claws.

Leaves whipped by him as he descended, dragging tiny stinging scratches against his skin that were healed the instant they were made, and then he was in the darkness of the forest, racing parallel with the fast moving fire. He thought he

heard a laugh drift by him on the wind.

It was hard to see, but he thought he recognized the voice - some vassal of his, perhaps, or maybe it was someone he'd wounded long ago, come to take his revenge, too weak to injure the youkai but more than strong enough to kill a human woman.

Cowards, all of them. Lowly, treacherous, cowardly filth -

Blinding light flashed across his vision, and he barely had time to launch himself out of the way of the blaze that scorched a path through the forest before it flickered and disappeared, leaving glowing embers scattered in its wake.

He cursed mentally. The light had been just enough to confuse him in that one instant, but it would not be so again. The weird, taunting laughter came again, and he whirled in its direction. Slightly further away, going more off to an angle than last time. Not stopping to think, he raced after it.

The cool wind in his nose intoxicated him as he followed the fire that danced just out of his reach. Growling, Sesshoumaru drew Toukijin from the sash at his waist and leaned forward, his blood boiling at the elusive and presumptuous bastard that had dared to come near him, that had dared to even think about injuring -

The quiet thoughts at the back of his mind churned, twisting up in knots.

Another fiery blast shook him from the chaos of his head, sending him dashing a hard right from his trajectory, and once again the youkai changed directions. It dawned on Sesshoumaru that he was being toyed with.

Which was just the sort of thing that got right under his skin. Face pulled into a thunderous scowl, he twisted deftly in the air, planted his feet against a solid tree trunk, and pushed off with such force that he heard the agonizing sound of splintered wood, followed by the crash of the tree behind him. It was all very distant, though, because he had closed the gap, he was there, and one swipe of Toukijin sent the youkai crashing into the underbrush, trailing thick, brimstone blood behind him.

The world snapped out of the thin blade of the hunt, blooming into existence around him. Not bothering to sheath his blade, Sesshoumaru calmly approached his injured enemy.

To his dismay he found that he did recognize his adversary - one of his so-called allies - but he could not remember his name. Not that it mattered since soon he would be dead. Then no one would ever need to know his name ever again.

He gazed impassively at the dying demon before him.

The demon gazed back. At his approach, yellow eyes turned up and regarded him with a strange, almost maniacal glee, and the bloody grin set deep in sickly sallow skin was eerily white and crimson. Blood dripped down the pointed chin. The bizarrely happy look on the youkai's face would have been a sign for caution if not for the fact that, further down his body, his hands struggled to push his own slippery entrails back inside his abdomen. As it was, the demon's expression was merely unnerving.

He was breathing heavily, fluid rattling through his lungs.

The demon didn't have much time, and neither did Sesshoumaru. "What were you hoping to distract me from?" Sesshoumaru demanded, low and quiet, cutting, as it were, to the heart of the matter.

The youkai just giggled, letting his orange hair fall into his eyes.

"Answer me, and I'll kill you quickly."

The lips parted, and for a moment Sesshoumaru thought that he might find an answer, but instead a crimson tongue snaked out of the youkai's mouth, seemingly searching for the blood on his chin, finding it, licking it up, withdrawing.

It snickered again. "I am at your disposal, milord," the demon said happily.

Sesshoumaru felt his patience slipping, revulsion rising to meet it. "Answer the question," he commanded.

Once again that eerie giggle burbled from the bloody mouth.

"I am only a slave," he snickered, his voice a wheezing, ingratiating whine. "I am only a servant of the House of the Moon, I am only here for Sesshoumaru-sama, to help him be strong - forces are gathering against you milord, but here we are, to help you, I am loyal - "

Comprehension dawned.

Here we are, to help you be strong.

An involuntary snarl leapt from his throat. Without hesitation he lunged forward, slicing cleanly through the demon's neck, and then he was hurtling through the

trees without a backward glance.

A trap. A diversion.

I should have seen it coming, he thought. I should have known, should have been cautious, should have, should have, should have -

Desperately he inhaled, wanting to catch her scent so badly that it hurt, but when he did he almost wished he hadn't.

Sesshoumaru raced on through the forest, could barely think, didn't want to think but had to -

She's not alone, he thought. She's not alone, she's not alone, she's not alone, find her find her find her -

* * *

The form of the youkai in front of her wavered beneath the knowledge of his purpose.

He's here to kill me, Kagome thought dimly. The point of her arrow flared as the realization slipped through her mind like a specter through walls. He's here to kill me, and Sesshoumaru isn't here to stop him. I'm all alone.

She'd been alone before. No big deal.

...And I'm not a whore. For some reason, this seemed very important to her. It was very important that she - and he - not be dirtied that way, even only in rumor. Of course she'd always known, deep inside and mostly unconsciously, that most people assumed she and Sesshoumaru were lovers, but she'd never heard it spoken out loud in such a way before.

And even though it would never happen, it didn't help that she knew she might succumb to him, should he ever choose to - to -

Insanely, as her life hung in peril, Kagome felt a small wave of heat at the thought, just a ghost of her desire, almost teasing her...

I'm not a whore, she repeated. I'm not, I'm not, I'm not -

She felt very, very ugly. The fingers holding her arrow twitched, burning to let go.

The youkai in front of her leaned casually against a tree, as if she and he were merely chatting, as if they were not mortal enemies, each seeking the end of the other. The sight brought her back, and mentally she shook herself.

It wasn't important - she had to... she should try to do something. Desperately, her mind fumbled for the right questions - what would Sesshoumaru want to know from this demon?

Narrowing her eyes, Kagome pushed her dark feelings from her head and steadied her slightly wavering hands. "You called him your lord," she said quietly. "Are you a vassal?"

The youkai's eyes flared with amusement, as though he were just waiting for her to ask this question so he could answer her. "Of course I am! Why would I be here if I didn't have an interest in Sesshoumaru-sama's little mistakes?" He whistled low. "Who could have guessed he'd be dumb enough to take a human whore?" he added, seemingly to himself.

In her chest, there was a tiny snap.

"I am not his whore!" Anger swelled inside, warming the numbness of her heart, bringing tentative feeling back into her body. "I am Sesshoumaru-sama's loyal ally. Unlike you, it seems," she accused. "You're nothing but a traitor."

"That's not true at all," said the demon. "I am loyal to Sesshoumaru-sama."

"Then who are you? What are you doing here?" she demanded. The muscles in her arms were quivering beneath the tension, and she wasn't certain how long she could keep from shooting him. Much as he richly deserved it, she knew an opportunity for information when she saw one.

She just wished that she didn't feel so terrified.

The youkai's voice seemed preternaturally loud; it hurt her fear-enhanced ears. "I am his loyal servant, and I am here to... aid him."

"If you wanted to help him so badly," Kagome said sharply, "you'd be at his home, ensuring that it is safe."

"But that is so boring," the youkai said arrogantly, waving an imperious hand,

"and besides, if I kill you, he will no longer be distracted, and there will be no need for him to defend his home."

Distracted? I thought... wouldn't... no, that can't be right, the only benefit to killing me is to injure him!

...Isn't it?

She felt the blood draining from her face. "What are you saying?" she demanded, struggling to keep the panic from coloring her voice. "Speak clearly!"

For the first time in their conversation, the youkai frowned, and the look was so ferocious that she nearly took a step backwards.

Don't! she screamed at herself. Don't run! Don't back down!

Her arms trembled.

"I am saying," the youkai replied softly, and his voice sounded horribly warm, "that when Sesshoumaru-sama is strong, the lands are stable, and stable lands provide... opportunities. But when he is weak, things fall into chaos." The youkai's eyes gleamed as he took a step forward. "Mortal things," he said, almost dreamily, "make him weak. If I get rid of you, he will become strong again, and there will be more order, more power for us all. Without him, things are... uncertain. The land languishes."

Then he smiled. "So you see, it's all for him that I do this. It will be painful, but will preserve the order of things, as they should be. It will be like removing an infected limb." Nodding, as if he had proven a point, he took another step forward.

Kagome could only watch, paralyzed, her mind in turmoil; cool, blue despair was threading its way through her gut.

All this time she had believed... she didn't know what she had believed, but it had never, ever occurred to her that his allies might wish to see her dead as well.

Had she been in danger even in his home? From his servants? Was that why they had to leave so quickly?

It must have been. To all of them, she was just history looping back on itself, except this time they knew how to mitigate the damage of a human; eliminate the human, eliminate the weakness. Or exploit the weakness to their own advantage.

He'd left his home, just to make sure she survived. He had left, for her. She was such a liability that should he have stayed and let her go, his enemies would have sought her out and killed her. And yet he had gone with her, which was so much worse, because it proved to his allies that, despite the things he knew and the lessons learned, he valued another mortal woman. She was his weakness.

They all wanted her dead.

This cannot be, Kagome thought, feeling cold. I can't mean that much to him. He cannot have done all of these things just for me.

She didn't know what to think or how to feel, and the youkai was strolling ever closer to her, his sharp teeth gleaming white in the half-light of dusk.

"At least," she murmured, almost to herself, "I trust his judgement."

It was the wrong thing to say. Or the right one, perhaps.

She watched as the youkai's lips twisted, an eerie, incoherent roar that might have held the ghost of words booming from his chest and then she thought she saw him blur at the edges - so fast, so impossibly fast - and then he pounced -

The world was very still, and the impact of her arrow in his chest was the only sound in that endless space between her life and her death.

The youkai was still in the air when Sesshoumaru broke through the trees.

For a terrible moment, time seemed to slow to a stop - she could see everything, the look of surprise on the youkai's face, the frightening frenzy in Sesshoumaru's eyes, the perfect swell and fall of their clothing - and then the demon hit the ground and Sesshoumaru was standing over him, Toukijin drawn.

"Keiichi," she heard him say, "were you truly too cowardly to fight me?"

But the youkai didn't answer; instead he lay on the ground and seemed to paw at the air, as feeble as a kitten. There was a long moment as he gasped for breath, and when he did speak, his voice was hoarse and raw, no longer the velvety texture that had mesmerized her.

"Bitch," he gasped, "what did you do to me?"

Sesshoumaru's eyes flickered towards her.

Her fingers were so cold. Her body was so cold, but it had nothing to do with youki, because -

Oh.

"Your... your youki," she heard herself say. "I sealed it. Um... now - now you just have the... have the strength of a human..."

Her voice was only a little tremulous - almost calm, even - but inside she was filled with a pensive terror - she had meant to seal him completely, but she'd done it wrong, she hadn't finished it properly, hadn't let go enough, and she was doomed, doomed, doomed. At the base of her throat was a crushing pressure, but whether it heralded tears or laughter she could not say. Perhaps they were one and the same.

Her eyes were still trained on the youkai on the ground, so she watched as his fingers reached for the shaft buried in his chest, feeling the first stirrings of panic jolting through her legs. Then, without warning, the sealing spell crackled and sparked. He jerked his hand away, his face a perfect study in horror.

"Really, Kagome," Sesshoumaru murmured, "that is rather harsh."

He lifted Toukijin and placed the blade under the demon's chin, tilting his captive's head. They stared each other in the eye, both filled with defiance and some unspoken understanding.

"Tell me about the House of the Moon," Sesshoumaru said calmly.

The youkai - Keiichi, her mind supplied, and somehow that made it so much worse - emitted a wheeze, which, after a moment, Kagome recognized with vague horror as the approximation of a laugh.

"Your house stands," the demon hissed eagerly, urgently, "but not for long. There is... a loose coalition building against it. I do not know when they will strike." Then he smiled, baring his pointed teeth. "Milord, if you kill her and present her head to - "

Kagome gave a small scream as Sesshoumaru drove Toukijin straight through the demon's eye.

Then it was done.

Her hands were shaking violently with the adrenaline that still coursed through her system, and she could not steady them. Stubbornly, Kagome forced her fingers to clench around her bow just for something - anything - solid to hold on to, and watched numbly as Sesshoumaru whipped the blade of his sword, a short sharp movement that sent what had been Keiichi's brains off into the underbrush before wiping it against a mossy tree and sliding it back into place at his hip.

Then Sesshoumaru glanced over his shoulder at her.

"No killing blow?" he asked her, and his tone was so ironic she thought he might be serious.

She let her gaze fall to the ground, feeling strangely ashamed.

"I thought I might try sealing him," she told him quietly. "In case he had any useful information."

There was a soft sound as he took a step in her direction.

"Look at me, Kagome," he commanded.

Kagome looked at him.

There was... something cold as winter in his eyes, an expression she hadn't seen since she was fifteen; her legs jerked slightly with the sudden, instinctive urge to flee this predatory creature that suddenly stood in the place of the man she had grown to care for so deeply -

- but she knew that this was Sesshoumaru, who had risked so much for her. She stayed where she was.

He was still staring at her, and then he said, very softly:

"Do not gamble."

She could hear the promise of death, should she gamble and lose, in the words beneath the words.

And Kagome wanted to tell him that she wouldn't, to swear to him that she would not risk her life, but that was an oath she could not keep, and then she just wanted to be angry, to tell him that she had made that gamble when she had

jumped down the well for a story, that she had made that gamble when she had fallen through time to find him.

It was her choice to take this bet, and it would be she who decided which risks were worth it.

She'd thought he was worth refraining from the killing blow; that was her choice to make.

And really, she thought with a small, hollow despair, the stakes were so high already that it seemed pointless not to go as far as she could.

But Kagome didn't say any of that. Instead, she swallowed around the lump in her throat and opened her mouth.

"You need to go home, Sesshoumaru."

The sound of her voice was strangely flat and heavy in the rising dark of the silent forest.

His eyes narrowed a cold, significant fraction.

Her throat clenched tight on itself, choking on the angry, lying yell she kept locked inside. I didn't ask you to do this for me, she wanted to shout. I never wanted this to happen! Go home, get out of here, I don't need you!

Except that she did need him. But she also couldn't let him just lose it all again.

"I'll be fine," she told him firmly, not believing it but praying that he would. "You need to go."

High above, the breeze wove its way through long, full branches, sending leaves rattling against each other. They sounded like tiny bones.

Then he nodded, and she felt herself falter for just a second until he arrested her fall with his voice.

"Yes," he said, "I do. But I will stay."

Nothing seemed to work properly - her tongue would not move, her feet would not walk - and so she could only watch helplessly as he turned away from her and strolled into the forest without another word, leaving her alone with a cooling corpse and a blazing pain in her heart.

* * *

Night fell. In the north a summer storm gathered the darkness to itself and rolled it into towering clouds, keeping it until the time when it would burst in a blaze of light and water, and on the wind rode the thick scent of rain. All around him the woods were quiet, but not peaceful; it was a pensive stillness that waited, building pressure and muffled sound, for the right moment to fly apart and scatter its chaos into the world.

It was a night that he could taste, but there was no pleasure in it.

Sesshoumaru was cluttered inside his head, cramped inside his own body. His thoughts were wrapped up in what he had allowed to happen, and any convenient walls he may have built in his mind to separate her from the violence that kept her alive had crumbled; she was a gentle creature, and now he could no longer pretend that she was safe. Now she stood in the darkness he had fought so hard to keep from her.

As though he were on a tether, Sesshoumaru wove wide circles around her as he searched for any other signs of intrusion upon the small domain they shared together, but there was nothing to find. If there had been any other demons in league with the bear and the fire youkai they were long gone, their scent erased by the clean rain-laden breezes. Nevertheless, he kept searching.

There was no reason for him to continue the hunt, of course, but he could not bring himself to return to Kagome just yet. The base of his spine itched with resentful claustrophobia, even as he circled her; he was not used to anchors.

It had all become so complicated. At first it had seemed that the things that bound him to her - grief and honor, debt and obligation - were merely whims that could be broken easily, should he so choose, but now it appeared the connections between them were stronger and deeper than such vague and simple inclinations. What, exactly, held him to her was still a mystery to him, but he did not like it.

And still each moment spent in her company softened the urge to sever all ties, as if he were happy to be so bound.

His mind kept traveling back to what Keiichi had said, before Toukijin cleaved his skull.

If you present her head, the bear had told him, they will know that you are strong.

And, even further back, his dark and bloody thoughts before her quarters in his home, in the cold breast of the sea -

If I were strong, I would have killed her myself.

He could still do it.

He had all the time in the world to kill her, if he wanted.

Except now, it seemed, killing her would be a waste. He had spent so much time and effort ensuring that she lived that it seemed pointless to throw it all away simply because a pack of cowards and traitors thought they knew something about him. The regard that he held for what others thought had never been much to begin with, anyway; after all, had he really cared he would never have kept Rin with him. The youkai lord and the little girl had been bound together by a whim, and since reconsidering his whim was out of the question - he wanted her near him, for no other reason than that it pleased him, of course - she had stayed by his side. What others thought of this development was not important. Sesshoumaru always did as he pleased.

And yet, his mind whispered, if he had heeded the talk of others, if he had left her in some human village, she never would have died; he never would have known her at all, would never have mourned her so deeply. She would have lived, but he would not have cared one way or the other.

It was his own reckless disregard that had left her vulnerable; he did not have to care what others thought, but it affected him all the same. Ignoring that, perhaps, had been his mistake.

Perhaps he would always stand in the shadows cast by Rin, and they were so much larger here inside his mind than any shades she could have trailed behind her in life. Perhaps he wished only to make amends for his failure; perhaps he wished only to escape from her shadows by rewriting the past with Kagome.

Except Kagome was not a little girl. She was not his little girl - she was, most certainly, a woman - but he still wished to keep her safe from whatever danger he brought to her.

That had to be it. Like his lands and his name and his heritage, he was responsible for keeping her unmolested by forces that sought to destroy him. That he took some treacherous pleasure in her was of no consequence; he had no other obligation to her. He stayed tethered through his honor, and the moment they parted on the outskirts of Edo - she to her battle and he to his - he would be free, just as he liked.

So why, Sesshoumaru wondered, did the thought not make him happy?

Outside the gloom of his head, the wind picked up slightly, trailing the cool promise of water across his face. With a frustrated sigh, Sesshoumaru turned toward the clearing, feeling his ties slacken the nearer he drew.

The fire was burning brightly when he arrived, casting warm light over everything. Next to it, Kagome had spread her sleeping bag, and she was sprawled across the strange, smooth fabric, staring at the creeping clouds above her. She had already washed and changed for the night; she was wearing those clothes that taunted him so much. He walked to where she lay, watching her watch the coming storm.

By all appearances she was enjoying the night air. Her hands were tucked behind her head, glossy locks of hair spilling over her pale arms like black rivers. One leg

was bent, pointing to the sky above her, and the other casually crossed over it, ankle to knee. To his eyes, Kagome looked content.

His nose detected a different story, though; he could smell her fear and apprehension, marring the lovely brightness of her normal scent. Sesshoumaru imagined that she was thinking of the future - knowing her, she was also thinking of his as well as her own - imagining the trial she was soon to face. There was no more avoiding it, now; the time had come for her to complete the task she had chosen to undertake.

Kagome shifted her eyes from the sky to his face. Her features were remarkably tranquil, and she gave him a small smile.

"Take off your armor," she said. "Come sit with me."

He looked at her for a moment wondering, idly, why she thought he would do what she said, but then he realized it was because he would. Of course, it wasn't as though he did not ask things of her, and since she usually complied the trade-off seemed fair.

He could not remember the last time he had ever felt any kind of fairness or balance between himself and another. Maybe he never had before.

Thoughtfully, Sesshoumaru removed his swords and armor and set them by his tree before turning back to where Kagome was spread out on the ground. Gracefully he sank down next to her, and, stiff-backed, he crossed his legs and folded his hands into his sleeves before turning his gaze to the clouds that hung, heavy and swollen, high above them. It seemed to him as though the night had been slung low over the earth, weighted down with the rain that threatened to break.

For a little while they gazed at the sky, each lost in their own thoughts and pretending not to steal glances at the other.

After a time there was a low roll of thunder in the distance. Kagome sat up at the sound and scooted to his side, still staring at the sky. She was close enough to brush against his sleeve. Sesshoumaru forced himself to stay still, to keep his hands to himself, to ignore all the shadows lurking in the forgotten rooms of his head, each of them cast by things he could not see.

He shifted his gaze to the fire.

Kagome watched him transfer his attentions to the flames in front of him, and in the quiet of her mind she almost smiled at the expression on his face, so locked and guarded and yet so pure and innocently revealing to someone who knew him well.

She really hadn't expected him to sit by her - he tended to dismiss such requests - but clearly it had suited him to do so tonight, for whatever reason. Maybe he just felt like being near her after her brush with death today.

Kagome was glad; he took her mind off things. Before he had so gently intruded, she had been staring at the sky contemplatively, and missing Inuyasha.

Of course, she never really stopped missing him, because the world didn't work that way. She might have managed to grow out and around the hole of his loss, might have been able to obscure it with the dullness of her every-days, but just because it was hidden didn't mean it was gone. Of all the people she had loved and lost, he had given her one of the deepest scars - not because of anything he did, but because she had loved him so much, so all the things that had made him Inuyasha had left behind impressions, little fossils in her so deep and detailed that

no one who came after could ever fit perfectly into his place. And that was how it should be.

She had not really thought of him in a long time, though. Inuyasha was gone, and the person she wished for in times of trouble - and times of happiness and times of boredom and any time at all, really - was now someone else. He was gone and she loved him, but his absence no longer ruled her life.

But now, so close to the end of her journey, teetering on the edge of something she couldn't put a name to, now she missed Inuyasha. She missed him because, no matter what happened, he had always reassured her that things would be all right, that he would fix this or that problem, destroy this or that enemy, bring some mangled form of justice to the world. Even though things might be different in the world of the aftermath, they would still be all right.

Kagome had always believed him; though his manner was rough his intentions were good, and he remained perpetually convinced that the next battle would be the one after which everything would be better.

But Inuyasha and all his brash optimism were both gone. It was his brother who was here beside her now.

The difference between the two brothers - or one of the differences, anyway - was that Inuyasha thought he could make things right, and Sesshoumaru knew that he couldn't, that the world was a cruel place where terrible things happened and justice was scarce, and he expected her to know this too. He expected her to be an adult about it and get on with things even without the hope of a happy ending.

It was so funny to remember that, for all of his childish ways, Sesshoumaru was far, far older than she would ever be, and was, in other ways, very much a grown

man.

She wanted to ask him how he did it, except that this was something that could not be taught or told, only learned on one's own, and right now she was learning so quickly that it felt like screaming.

But there were other questions to ask now. If there was ever an after, then she could ask the unimportant ones, the ones that plagued her.

Kagome almost hated to break the silence, but she hated to stay quiet when they were so close to being over...

"I guess we're going soon," she said suddenly.

From the corner of her eye she saw Sesshoumaru blink, and then, after a second, nod. "Yes," he said, not looking at her. "Tomorrow."

She was very close to him, and Sesshoumaru thought he felt her shudder at his answer, as though her body and the air were one and the same. She drew fractionally closer.

"How long will it take?" she asked him.

Sesshoumaru had already thought of this. He had thought of it more than he wished to, though he did not tell her that fact. "A day," he said instead.

Her surprise was evident in her voice, and somewhere underneath it was a current of fear. "Only a day? But I thought - "

"I will carry you," he interrupted her. "Time grows short."

Expecting to hear her despair, he was surprised when he heard her laugh softly. Curious and strangely apprehensive, Sesshoumaru turned to her, wondering what she was thinking.

Kagome noticed his inquisitive look and gave him a wan smile. "It's just... this is our last night together." Her voice sounded odd, almost as though it were full of echoes of words that she dared not even think.

Swallowing, he nodded.

She looked away.

"I'm going to die, aren't I?" she said, lightly.

In the calm before the storm, Kagome heard him become very still. Turning her face to the sky once more, she caught the skitter of lightning as it boldly leapt from one cloud to another.

It was not what she had meant to say, but now that she had it was as good a question to ask as any, so she waited for him to pick up her words, turn them over in his hands, and toss them back to her.

She listened to Sesshoumaru spin his silence before she heard him release the breath he had caught at her question.

"It is not inevitable," he said quietly.

In her chest, she felt the burble of a hysterical laugh, but she quashed it ruthlessly. It was just such a Sesshoumaru thing to say, though, so bland and bald that it sometimes seemed as if he were a living, breathing satire of himself.

Not inevitable, she thought sadly, and at that moment she missed Inuyasha even more, Inuyasha who would have told her that she was stupid for even asking, because of course she wasn't going to die, he'd make damn sure of that because he was going to take care of her.

Turning over and in on herself, she wished, knowing it was foolish, that Sesshoumaru did not expect her to be so strong.

Her fingers felt numb. Rhythmically, she clenched her hands into fists, trying to work some life back into them, though her heart seemed to have stopped already.

Not yet, she thought. But soon enough.

She could have just left it there, but she did not. "Not inevitable," she blurted suddenly, "but it's... likely."

Anything is possible, I guess.

And maybe he wasn't so cruel after all, because he didn't say anything to that, just sat next to her, still and silent, holding the future close to him so that she would not see.

Thunder mumbled as it moved across the sky. Still far away, Kagome thought, though she did not know if it was the storm she was thinking of, or him.

"When were you going to tell me that your allies wanted to kill me, too?" she asked abruptly.

"Never," he answered without hesitation. Their voices seemed loud in the damp air, masking even the crackling of the fire.

"Why not?" she wanted to know.

Uncomfortably, Sesshoumaru shifted slightly where he sat, willing her to cease this line of questioning, but it did seem rather pointless now to keep things from her. It wasn't as if he had liked doing so in the first place. He chose his words carefully.

"You had enough to occupy your mind," he said after a moment, "and any who questioned my judgment relinquished his status as ally."

There was a long pause, and then a small, battle-scarred hand alighted on his knee, commanding his attention before he forced himself to meet her eyes.

"I'm sorry," she said.

But he already knew that.

They looked at each other. After a moment she withdrew her hand, color rising to her cheeks as though she were embarrassed, and glanced away.

Kagome tried to order her thoughts as she watched a fallen leaf tumble by on the rainy breeze. Eventually they would have to relocate to a tree - would he hold her again, if they took shelter? - but for right now she needed to be under the sky. There were stars up there, somewhere behind the clouds; she couldn't see them but she knew they were there, and she had so many good memories beneath the stars that she wanted to remember them all as quickly as possible, so she could cup them in her hands once more before she died.

The terrible thing - the truly terrible thing - was that even if she did survive, she would most likely not be the same person when she came through on the other side. She had... killed before, but not so close, and not a real, honest-to-god human being. Technically she didn't have to kill the madoushi - the story said nothing about that, after all - but when she had tried to seal the youkai in the forest and failed she had realized something that she hadn't thought of before.

If she were lucky, she wouldn't end up like Kohaku, who had cracked down his center, or like Kazuo, who hated himself so much. If she were lucky.

"I have to kill one of them," she said quietly. "Did you know that?"

Next to her, Sesshoumaru was quiet for a heartbeat or two before she heard him laugh, the short sharp sound that had grown so familiar.

She knew what that laugh meant. Slowly she turned her head and leaned toward him, looking into his face. He seemed to struggle for a moment before he shifted slightly, finally letting his eyes meet hers again.

"You did know, didn't you?" she said. "And you didn't tell me."

Sesshoumaru was silent.

It was so much of what she had feared. Kagome swallowed around the strange thing that had lodged in her throat, some thing full of claws and teeth. "If I can't kill the god - or spirit, or mononoke, or whatever it is - I have to kill her, don't I? Because if both are alive, one will save the other."

There was a strange look in Sesshoumaru's eyes, so odd and sharp that she almost reached out and passed her fingertips over his eyelids - beautifully marked, like his cheeks, like his brow - to close them.

Instead she looked away, fixing her gaze on the ground even though she didn't see it.

"If I don't kill her, I have to kill the god, because she'll just release it when I'm gone," she said, smoothing out the edges in her mind, speaking the puzzle pieces out loud so she could watch them fall into place. "If I don't kill the god, I have to kill her, because it will just heal her."

And then, "I've never killed a human being before."

Overhead another bolt of lightning sparked against the sky. This time, the thunder that rumbled was much closer and much louder. When it had died away, she heard Sesshoumaru move restlessly, the heavy silk of his clothes whispering to the crackling of the fire.

"Why do you think you must kill her and not the other?" he asked quietly.

Kagome blinked. She had thought it would be obvious. "Because..." she started, then stopped and licked her lips, frowning a little. "Because I don't have enough power to kill it."

"Why do you think that?" His voice was low and even, and she was afraid to seek out his face for fear that he would look just as low and even as he sounded, just as cool and impassive as she had always thought he was when she was younger.

It was so obvious, why didn't he see? "Because my heart needs to be pure."

He rustled again. "You are pure."

And it was so strange to hear those words on his lips that Kagome felt as though she were going to cry.

"No," she said softly, "I was, but I don't think I'm pure enough any more. I just don't feel as good or strong as I used to be..."

She took a deep breath. "So much has happened," she whispered. "I can't help but think that my heart must be very bitter by now..."

She trailed off, and Sesshoumaru wanted to say something, to her, to reassure her in some way, but he did not know how, so he did not answer.

He couldn't answer, really, so it didn't matter. All his thoughts and inclinations were dull and muted, and he was almost hypnotized by her face; to him, she looked very sad - not because she herself was unhappy, but because there was a

heartbreaking earnestness in her expression, a naked sincerity he had never seen anywhere but on the face of a child.

Then again, she was never anything but heartbreakingly earnest; she just hid it better now than she had in her youth, when she had been so bright and so close to the surface.

Now she was bright again, but in a different way, as though she were full of fire instead of sunshine.

Kagome raised her head, and he slid his eyes away, uneasy, wondering if her glance would burn him if he looked back.

She'd seen him avoid her eyes, and it hurt, but not so much that she couldn't speak. She just needed to know so many things, and she could only ask him a handful of questions. She had to choose carefully.

The future loomed, and Kagome quailed in her secret heart.

"Are you ever afraid of anything?" she wondered suddenly, her voice a little too loud. She didn't care, though - it seemed so important, now, to hear him say that yes, yes he felt dread and terror beneath that bored facade; she had heard it in his voice the day that he had smelled her blood, had seen it in his eyes the moment he came through the trees, not too late but so close that he might have been. Her heart was pounding as she waited for his answer.

Finally he shifted his gaze to her. "Why should I fear anything," he asked, "when the only thing worth fearing is me?"

For the faintest, briefest of moments, Kagome hated him fiercely.

That is not it. That is not the right answer, she thought savagely. Don't lie to me.

Then, just as quickly, her hatred died as she realized that what he said was perfectly, utterly true; it might not have been what he meant, but it was the truth all the same, inadvertently slipping off his tongue without his permission.

She drew back slightly, astonished at his admission, to take him in, to see him cast in different shadows. And when Sesshoumaru gazed back at her, she thought that she could see, in his eyes, the place inside him that weighed heavy with all his regrets and loss, with his mistakes that would live as long as he would. She thought she could see all the emotions that knotted him up, over and over, into a creature as weak and assailable as any mortal.

He hated his griefs, even as he gathered them to him.

Wide-eyed, she leaned in to him, and he did not pull away. How much, she wondered, wanted to ask, held inside, do you fear yourself?

But she didn't ask that. Instead, she said, softly, "I'm scared."

He was very close, and, dizzily, she remembered his hand on her thigh as she sat beneath the tree where she had waited for him to come home to her.

"Will you not win?" he asked, as if she truly knew, as if all the pretty stories she had been told - fairytales, parables, romances - had not turned out to be lies.

"The story says I will," she said, "but it doesn't say whether or not I will survive."

"Ah," he sighed.

There was a swell of silence and then lightening flashed and thunder snarled right above them, causing Kagome to jump.

She came back to her surroundings a little. It was so dark now; the fire was burning low, but she couldn't bring herself to stand up and replenish it, couldn't bring herself to part from him for a moment more than necessary. Instead, she simply scooted a little closer to him, all her memories crowding around, tumbling down like waters, washing away the moment even as she desperately clung to it.

Sesshoumaru leaned a little toward her, inhaling deeply. Her scent was so strange and shining tonight, so deliciously mixed with the rain in the air - it was almost intoxicating. Each beautiful whiff of her wrapped itself around him, sinking down, teasing and soothing him at the same time, and he didn't want her to leave -

"Oh!" she said suddenly, startling him a little. He drew back fractionally as she turned her gaze to his face. "Oh, god!" she said again. "I have... I forgot...!"

She shook her head, deep lines of worry etched into her face.

She leaned in even further toward him, very close, close enough to close the space between them with the smallest of movements. But that was not what she was thinking about - he could smell her anxiety on her.

She was shaking her head. "I forgot to tell you - I can't believe it. Do you remember Machiko?" she demanded, and she seemed so agitated that he merely

nodded, not trusting himself to question her.

He saw Kagome lick her lips. "Well, she gave me a message to give to you, right before we left to go to, um... Edo."

Sesshoumaru said nothing, merely waited for her to reveal what she had to say so that she could calm down.

Kagome squirmed a little where she sat, averting her eyes again. "She said... um... that..." She swallowed hard. "She said that she was sorry."

It had been a while ago, and so much had happened between now and then that for a moment Sesshoumaru had no idea what she was talking about. The confusion jolted him unpleasantly for a moment until he suddenly remembered, with remarkable clarity, that night in the snow when the pregnant hime had tried to seduce him.

She apologized? he thought distantly, blinking.

It was such a strange thing for Kagome to tell him. He had not expected it.

"Why are you telling me this now?" he wondered, voice soft.

He saw color flood to Kagome's cheeks, and her scent spiked -

Sesshoumaru felt the breath knocked from his lungs. She was leaning into him now, her head turned, just a heartbeat away from the soft hollow between his shoulder and his chest; if he inhaled deeply, she would be pressed against him.

She shook her head, minutely.

"I just remembered," she whispered hoarsely.

He was trying to catch himself, leaning into her as well. "And why did you remember, Kagome?" he wanted to know, and his voice was soft, murmured into her hair.

He saw her shiver. "Because..." she trailed off.

Her head drooped a little more. "Because she said that... she thought she was going to die. She said she didn't want to feel... unloved if she did."

Sesshoumaru froze. Over the little rumbles of thunder, he heard her breathing pick up pace.

He closed his eyes.

The unspoken words hung in the air - make me feel loved, just once - and it was dragging him down. He knew, he knew that he could give this one thing to her, could take this one thing from her. He had let himself want her, and now that he had crossed that line his thoughts were wild, his body burning with the thought of her sweet, soft curves, helpless and needy. She was untouched, would be slick and snug and oh, when she moaned his name -

She wanted this. She wanted to know this before she died, and he wanted to know her before she died, as well. He wanted to pin her against the ground, to

have her up against a tree. He wanted to drag her into his lap, spread her thighs and hold her against him, suckle her, devour her, let her ride him until they slaked their thirst. There was no one else around. No one would ever know.

But -

It was not enough. He would know.

And, in the end, that was all that mattered, because he would remember. He would know that he had her once and let her go, would remember the way she tasted, the way she moved, and the memory of her would haunt him long after she would have died, because she was rooted so deeply in him that it was unthinkable for him to be without memories of her.

It should end there. That should have been the final word on the matter, but it wasn't because this was his ruin: even though he knew how much it would undo him, how eviscerated he would be, how hollow he would become because of it, he still wanted to choose her. He would not die if he could not have her, would not perish if he could not enter her and make her cry out. She was the worst possible choice that he could make, and he was fortunate, for he did not have to choose her. He wouldn't die if he didn't.

But he still wanted to so badly that it hurt. He wanted to so badly that he might regret this denial of pleasure as bitterly as if he had given in to it.

And very softly, very far away, Sesshoumaru wondered, his brain dark with desire and a strange, delicate misery, why it seemed that he never failed to want the thing that would cripple him the most.

Next to him, Kagome waited, wondering if he would turn to her, would touch her

the way she wanted, would soothe her and let her pretend that she was still as loved as she had once been, but he said nothing and did nothing, just like always.

But that was all right; she didn't really need them, neither his actions nor his words, and she didn't really need him to lie to her. That morning, maybe, she would have wanted him to lie, to give her this one fantasy that she wanted so badly, but now it didn't seem so important.

Really, she just wanted his true thoughts, and those she knew, though she probably only saw a fraction of them. But this was okay as well, because no matter what happened or might have happened, she would never have found out the full extent. He would never tell her what he thought of her, how he felt, would never declare anything, ever, but somehow that was all right, because when he had burst through the trees only a few hours ago, when he had been almost too-late, when he had been almost not-good-enough, and she had seen his face so clearly -

He would never say anything, but that look in his eyes hadn't been a lie. It hadn't been good or bad or ugly or beautiful, or anything at all, actually, except perfectly itself. But whatever it was he felt for her, she knew, at least, that it was real.

Sesshoumaru heard her laugh a little, and he opened his eyes again to see her, nearly resting against him.

She must have felt the stiffening of his limbs, because she straightened a little; though she hid her face, he could hear the little smile in her voice.

"So I'm going to die tomorrow," she said. It was a strange truth to hear from her. He suspected that even if he heard her say it every day of his life, it would always sound strange to hear such a dark fate on her lips.

He opened his mouth to reply, but she was already speaking again.

"I didn't actually think I was going to die," she said softly. "I thought it was possible, but I just... I never died before."

She gave a small laugh. "And I can't run away, you know? It's so horrible, what she's done, and I'm one of the only people who can do anything. So I have to.

"But I don't really want to die."

Then she sighed, gently, and he imagined that he could feel her breath stirring in him, burrowing down, finding a place in his heart where it could live forever, even if she didn't.

"I don't want to," she whispered, "but that's the way the story goes."

He felt as though she had sliced him open.

This was not right. Those words were true, but not right, and in his chest something twisted and strangled, snapped and shattered.

Sesshoumaru let himself drift closer to her, until his lips were so close to her hair he could almost taste it.

"This," he murmured, "is a very cruel story you are in."

She was still for a moment. Then, slowly, she leaned back slightly, lifting her head, and Sesshoumaru found himself gazing directly into her eyes.

She was close, magnetic - it would be easy to fall into her.

And yet he did not, for the look she gave him was so sad and sweet that it sucked the breath from his lungs, and in every soft line of her face lived a resignation so light and so pure that he could only watch helplessly as, in her eyes, her illusions burned away, until he was certain that she could see the bones of all things.

She was so luminous that it hurt to look upon her, but Sesshoumaru kept his gaze steady; it seemed dishonorable not to bear witness to her conflagration.

Then Kagome closed her eyes, turned her face to the curve of his shoulder, and gently rubbed her cheek against him.

"Oh, I don't know," she said softly, her voice oddly comforting. "It hasn't been so bad."

Sesshoumaru felt himself waver, and he almost, oh almost gave in, almost pulled her to him and let her have him, but at that moment the sky convulsed with lightening, roared with thunder, and the clouds tore apart, emptying themselves on the land below. The cool, heavy wetness jerked him back from the brink.

Kagome made no move to seek shelter. Instead she merely snuggled a little closer to him.

They were quiet for a long time as the fire died and their clothes filled with water.

Then Kagome shifted against him.

"Will you forget me, Sesshoumaru?" she asked, so softly that her voice wove itself into the rain, and he thought her throat might have been made from raindrops.

It was a heavy question, far too heavy, but he could not let it go unanswered, could not deny her this, and he had opened his mouth to tell her no, no she would not be forgotten before a frown passed over his features and he closed it again.

Because that wasn't right, not right at all. It wasn't that he wouldn't forget, but that he would...

- that he would recall her scent and the curve of her body, her eyes and her voice, her laugh and all the thousand and one things she had said to him, all the hundreds of secrets she shared with him in gesture and in words, all the beautiful thoughts she had let him see. He knew that he would take these things out and hold them, weigh them, taste and touch them.

He would sleep inside her laugh and live around her secrets, would wrap her voice around him and chase her scent into the day and out again, he would swallow her thoughts and make them his own. He would keep her with him until -

- well. Until. Just until. He would not resign her to his mind, to static silence, to lifelessness. He would not do that to her, as he had to so many others.

He would not just fail to forget her, for surely, surely a failure to forget could never be the same as the will to remember.

Very carefully, Sesshoumaru stretched out a hand and brought it to her face. He let the back of his fingers trail over the high plane of her cheek, feeling her shiver at the touch, then let his hand weave its way through her hair, lifting it from her skin, pulling it back to expose the arch of her throat.

Gently he leaned in, let his lips brush, feather-light, against the soft sweep of her brow before moving to the curve of her ear.

Then, very quietly, he gave her his promise.

"You will be remembered, Kagome," he whispered.

And then she laughed, and in it Sesshoumaru could hear the world stripped bare.

i will say that i'm alarmed / but it's too easy to do harm / and there's already too much damage done: Stuff happened. High air pressure from heat kills me. So it goes. And so on. I'm sorry, and thanks for being so patient with me. Incidentally, please don't ask me if this or that chapter is the end or not. Believe me, you will KNOW when it's done. It'll be great. You'll love it. Trust me.

Quick note on flames: while I really do appreciate the sentiment, valiant defenders of HotM's honor, threats on my review page make me a sad panda, and flames are, in the end, just opinions. And you know what they say. Opinions are like mustard: they taste great on a sandwich. But when you're not eating a sandwich, they just sit there in the fridge... on a shelf... in a jar... labeled... "Mustard." So. Less rage, more puppies and rainbows. Everybody wins!

Also, go check out the Chapter Illustration contest at houseofthemoon on deviantArt. It has floored me.

Most importantly, soooooooooo much freaking thanks goes out to Technoelfie for editing this chapter. Before it fell into her capable hands, it SUCKED. Now it is cool. And muchos gracias to Cinnamongrrl for helping me tie it down on the gurney and give it emergency liposuction. Thank you so, so much darlings. You rock my local sector of the space-time continuum.

And this one is for Dakota Angie, who also rocks, and whose illustrations of Sesshoumaru and lil' Inu never ever fail to pick me up and make me smile.

Tales from the House of the Moon
by
Resmiranda

Chapter Thirty-Three

"A song for all of those
who shot and missed."
- Propaghandi, "Showdown"

* * *

You will be remembered.

And that was that.

Kagome listened to his voice as she replayed it, over and over, in her head. It was so peculiar; she should have trembled at those words, for they were the most intimate that she had ever heard him say, but instead she was merely calm.

His claws were still tantalizingly tangled in her hair, his lips just a waver in resolve away from her skin, and though Kagome could feel her heart hammer wildly in her chest as it begged for more, for some reason it seemed far away. It seemed like a habit that she just couldn't be bothered to break.

She was cold. The rain had plastered her clothes to her body, making them chilled and heavy, and she had to keep blinking so that her eyes would not be filled with water. Oddly enough, she wasn't going to cry.

Which was strange, Kagome reflected, because she should be crying. His breath ghosted hotly over the shell of her ear, and Kagome wondered, smiling a little, if he truly realized the scope of what he had just said to her.

Probably not, she decided.

Story of our lives.

Perhaps he had only meant to comfort her in his strange way, but also, in his own strange way, he had given her his words to pry open and find the meaning inside, though such a thing wasn't always kindness; she could never be certain of what he truly meant.

The words that he spoke, the words beneath the words, were so tiny, so small -

He had promised more to her than just his memories. He had promised that she could decide her fate. He had promised that she could go on and he would not stop her. He had promised to trust that she would succeed.

He had promised not to intervene.

Which, of course, was how it should be, because he was never a part of this story, and she shouldn't have dragged him into it in the first place, and it would be so presumptuous to think he would even want to help her at all. Even if he did, this was an offer that required only pity to make.

She didn't want his pity, and she didn't want to say anything that might guilt him into another choice that he would regret, and she was so tired of regrets.

Kagome felt the past slip through her veins, beneath her skin, as much a part of her as her blood.

There had always been... choices... to make, but she had never really felt as

though there were any real choices, because all the options were so dismal that she could only pick one and desperately hope that it was correct. Since that first moment, when she tumbled down the well at the age of fifteen, she had been swept along, making the best of things, sometimes stumbling beneath the force, sometimes knocked off her feet with the strength of it, and then -

- when it had stopped, she found that she had forgotten how to walk forward.

Always, always, she cast her gaze back, always behind, waiting for the future to happen to her again, but of course, when she found herself in the place she wanted to be, everyone she needed had all walked forward while she was looking back, and left her behind. All her hope, all her unfulfilled love had arrested her, stopped her in her tracks, and in the end it had just been Kagome - good, kind, selfless Kagome - who was alone in the middle of the road, her head turned to the path behind, cradling her regrets in her hands.

Well. That was not exactly the truth. She was not entirely alone.

A shuddering breath ran through her.

If this had truly been a fairytale, Kagome thought to herself, she would have stayed with Inuyasha. If this had truly been a fairytale, she would still be well-loved, pure and beautiful and happy.

If this had truly been a fairytale, Sesshoumaru would have never lost the little girl that followed him on bare, dirty feet. If this had truly been a fairytale, he would still be dark and fierce and content with conquest and the power he held.

But she was alone, and he was still dark, but that darkness was deeper now, and he was restless, full of an endless ennui that she had never seen in him before Rin had died. And still the difference between them was that she had stumbled upon Inuyasha, had tumbled into the jewel, into fate by accident, but he had chosen Rin.

He had no one to blame but himself, and Kagome had no one to blame at all.

Kagome heard herself give another sharp little laugh.

No, this was how things would be. Whatever he chose - to give her his strength or to cut himself free - would be of his own volition. She would never ask; she would never desire his pity.

Kagome swallowed, tasting the rain in her head.

She felt sad, in a detached sort of way, because even if he had wanted her, she could never have been with him. It was too dangerous to stay here, too dangerous to open herself, too dangerous for both of them to turn in place and remember how to step forward again.

This is all out of my hands now, she thought.

Her fingers were moving, floating up until they hovered achingly close to his beautiful hair - his stupid, stupid pretty hair, she remembered suddenly, the memory brimming with what could have been either laughter or tears - but with a very immediate pang she stopped and forced her hand back to her side. Biting her lip, she pulled away just a little.

Sesshoumaru immediately released her, though she thought he might have let his fingers linger in her hair a moment longer than necessary, and she drew back so that she could see his face in the damp, dim light. He was looking at her with that same fierce scowl, the one he wore when he found the world displeasing, though she thought he might have appeared slightly more discontented that usual. It was probably just her imagination, though.

She smiled at him.

"I'm going to change my clothes and say goodbye," she said. "Then we can go."

He stared at her.

She just smiled back, because, really, what else was there to do?

Sesshoumaru, for his part, was still feeling slightly muzzy from her proximity, and whatever he had expected her to say, it had not been that. Their words had

twisted him up into impossible knots and he wasn't certain that he could undo himself in time to respond. For a moment his brain coughed and sputtered as he struggled to catch up to her.

"Go?" he finally said, sounding stupid even to his own ears; the fog that seemed to shroud him made his voice too loud.

But Kagome merely nodded. Little rain droplets cascaded down from her hair, though the rain that filled the night between them was fading.

"Mm-hm," she said. "I'm ready now."

Sesshoumaru blinked.

He was on the verge of opening his mouth again and asking her what, exactly, she was ready for, but she did not give him a chance to do so. Instead she simply rose to her feet and walked calmly to where her backpack sat, in relative dryness, beneath a tree. She didn't seem to notice - or care - that the rain had soaked through her garments, and the cloth she wore had become tantalizingly translucent.

It wasn't until nearly a full minute after she had passed into the trees that he gathered his wits enough to wrench himself away, and wretchedly, Sesshoumaru closed his eyes and tried to remember her exact words.

We can go, she had said. I'm ready now.

He felt something shift, sharp, jagged edges pushing against him.

Slowly he stood and began to wring the water from his sleeves, comb it from his hair, but his mind wasn't really on the task at hand. Instead, he replayed her voice over and over in his head, and each time he did he liked her tone less and less. She had sounded... calm. Collected. Just a few moments before he could hear a quavering, bittersweet note beneath her question - will you forget me? - but that had not been present when she had pulled away.

It disturbed him.

She was going to say her goodbyes. She wanted to go to Edo now. Not tomorrow, but now, because she was ready to fight, which meant that she was ready to die.

The thought shouldn't have left him with such an ache in his chest.

Abruptly, Sesshoumaru shook himself. Weak, he thought with a sudden surge of anger, and the ache inside him flickered. He swallowed hard, forced it down, felt it disconnect from him and float out into the night.

This is the way things are, he thought. But no, not that.

This is the way things ought to be.

Slowly, his fingers slid through his hair, letting the rain fall from him as he wondered why he felt so heavy. He'd always told himself that she might die, might be suddenly pulled out of this world and into the next, so obviously he was perfectly fine with the idea. The only difference now was that she had accepted the possibility as well, and so now she would be able to fight. So really, this was a good development, he concluded distantly, not a poor one.

Why didn't it seem like that, then?

With measured steps he walked to the gleaming pile of metal and bone that was his armor and began dismantling it. As he tugged each piece slowly and deliberately into place he struggled to ignore the strange impulse to drop everything, to dig his heels in and refuse to take her anywhere. It was a stupid impulse; after all, it was he who had decreed that they would leave for the end of their journey the following morning. This was simply a slight change in plans.

It was even a good change, Sesshoumaru decided mildly, since it would allow him to return home slightly sooner. That was a comforting thought, surely. He would go home, and Kagome would go on to do whatever duties she had to perform; whether she lived or died in the execution of those duties was of no consequence to him. After all, he was only here to keep her safe from his own enemies as she trained; he was not responsible for anything else.

Besides, it wasn't inevitable that she would die. He had said that himself, hadn't he? There was nothing in the story that dictated it be so.

- but there was something she had said, wasn't there? Not about dying, but about something else, and the world was spinning a little too fast, on the edge of control. If he wasn't careful he was going to stumble, was going to fail, and something was very, very wrong -

There was a noise behind him, the gentle mutter of a footfall on wet leaves, and Sesshoumaru turned to see Kagome standing across the clearing in her miko outfit. The thick cloth she wore was still dry, and her damp hair was pulled back as best she could manage. There were little tendrils escaping, though; little imperfections, everywhere.

The ghost of pain flared in him for a moment before he quashed it ruthlessly and felt nothing again.

He was silent as Kagome glanced down at her feet and seemed to shuffle in place without actually doing so before looking up and smiling too brightly.

"I'm going to the shrine," she said. "Are you going to be here when I get back?"

The sense of wrongness, of angles in the world where there should be none, grew sharper, more pronounced. Curtly, Sesshoumaru shook his head. "I will come with you," he said. "We will leave from there."

For a second she seemed slightly taken aback, but her confusion passed and was gone, replaced by her brittle smile once more, replaced by the shutting of the door behind her eyes, leaving him abandoned outside.

He saw her nod before she turned toward the shrine and began to walk. Sesshoumaru followed.

There was a cold anticipation in the pit of his gut, and he kept waiting for her to turn her head, to look behind her one last time, and yet she never did. She just kept walking, through the dark and damp, her eyes straight ahead, feeling her way when she could not see. High above, rain collected on leaves, grew into fat

drops, and pattered down. He listened to it falling all around them.

The rain had petered out to a drizzle by the time they reached the shrine steps, but lightening still flickered in the sky. Sesshoumaru stopped at the base of the stairs.

Already five steps up with one foot poised on the next, Kagome turned and gave him a curious glance. For a moment there was a question on her tongue, but instead she just smiled at him and turned back to the steep climb. If he came with her, he came with her. If he didn't, he didn't.

Kagome let her eyes fall on the steps beneath her feet as she slowly made her way to the top. In the depths of her head, she could hear little phrases, disconnected and meaningless, tumble over one another, important thoughts begging to be born before -

That was all - just before.

I'm going to die, aren't I?

She reached the top of the steps as another flash of lightening illuminated the courtyard in front of her. The wet alabaster stone looked eerie in the sudden light, but she crossed it anyway, to Fuyu's hut.

Fuyu and Kazuo were both there. The old miko was kneeling next to the cooking fire while across from her and further away from the flame, the threadbare samurai lounged wearily. Kagome thought, distantly, that it was amazing how tired he appeared all the time. In the long angry shadows of the stormy night, he looked like a corpse.

On the other hand, Fuyu gazed at her from where she sat, not bothering to turn her head from her contemplation of the flames. The old woman was just as intense as ever, and, just as she had done the very first day they met, Fuyu pinned her with those bright, painful eyes that Kagome knew would never waver.

Kagome wished she could be more like Fuyu. Kagome wished that she could stare the world in the face without flinching...

It was Kazuo who spoke first, dropping his voice into the fire-filled silence.

"You are going," he said mildly. It wasn't a question, simply an utterance of fact.

Kagome nodded. "It's time," she said. She thought, for a moment, that there was something else she should tell him, but nothing came to her so she simply caught her breath before closing her mouth a little awkwardly. Maybe there was nothing else, or maybe he heard it all, in the words beneath the words, the ones that she didn't say and couldn't even hear herself.

Either way, he simply nodded.

Kagome turned to Fuyu, who seemed to watch her guardedly.

"Are you ready?" the old miko asked after a long moment. The question hung in the air.

That's not a good question, Kagome thought mistily. Ready for what? But she needed to be ready for anything, so she just nodded, because she had been here too long, Sesshoumaru had been away too long, and who knew how many people had died in Edo? She had to be ready now, even if she wasn't.

Then she saw Fuyu sigh, and for the briefest of moments Kagome thought her face was filled with a sorrowful resignation, a bone-shattering surrender to her melancholy thoughts.

"What," the old woman said softly, "will your youkai do without you, girl?"

The sound of the rain picking up filled the small hut.

Kagome swayed. Fuyu had sounded tired, so sad. But perhaps more importantly - because of what consequence is sadness? - she was old and cynical, which, in the right light, could pass for wisdom.

Kagome could feel something building in her, an epiphany so sour she itched to open her head and pour it out. In the space of a breath it suddenly flashed bright, like lightening in her brain, and everything was illuminated.

Very slowly, very quietly, Kagome thought, It doesn't matter what he'll do. I am the young hero. I have journeyed a great distance, have studied under my master, and now I return to my origin to fulfill my destiny.

And then she thought, This is a fairytale.

Because that was the story, but that wasn't all of it, and Kagome thought: stories don't mention wooden spoons and twenty straight days of fish and rice. In stories, when people get sick, they never ooze or scream or go blue and cold with shock. In stories, the hero never wakes up from nightmares, doesn't drink away all his memories, doesn't try but fail anyway.

And then she thought: characters aren't people, so none of that is important, to a story.

And she thought: I am not important.

She almost laughed.

She was so much more important and worth so much less than she had thought, because Kagome didn't matter, only the destiny she had to fulfill. So there was no need for her to feel anything at all. The heroine was necessary; Kagome wasn't. And it had always been like that.

Fuyu was still waiting for an answer, and Kagome realized that there wasn't an answer - no important answer, anyway. It didn't matter what Sesshoumaru would do, because the story would end, and so would they. The world would not stand still for them, no matter how badly she wanted it to, and so there was only one answer to give, because it had always been the truth.

Gently, Kagome shook her head, and murmured quietly, "He's not mine."

She could almost feel a strange swell of emotion in the room, but it wasn't a necessary part of what she had to do, so Kagome merely unshouldered her backpack and set it next to her. Then she unslung her bow and slipped her wakazashi from beneath her obi before lowering herself to her knees.

In the quiet of the room, she placed her weapons in front of her and bowed

low, her forehead touching the ground.

"I am humbly grateful for your kind indulgence," she said. Her voice was clear and steady. "Thank you very much for training me."

There was only silence after her offering of thanks, and behind her eyelids she could see it stretch out almost languidly, a fragile peace, just like the peace in her heart. Kagome waited for a moment, listening to herself breath, before she straightened.

Kazuo was sitting up, and Fuyu had turned toward her. Slowly, reverently, Kagome slid her weapons into place and pulled her backpack over her shoulders.

Her fingers seemed weak, twigs wrapped in her dried-leaf skin.

She stood.

In the light of the cookfire, Kazuo's eyes glittered oddly.

"When you come back," he said suddenly, "you will drink with me."

Far away, there was a little stab of pain in her heart, and in her head she heard the faint whispers of another voice -

- when you come back, I will tell you then, come back, I will, when you, I will tell, when you come -

- but it was nothing of importance.

Kagome smiled and nodded before bowing low at the waist. Then she straightened and nodded at each of them.

There seemed to be a mist in her brain, and both of them were painted against the blue night in tones of orange and red. They looked sick and ill, and in her chest she felt the flutter of what might have been sadness, but she was just a heroine now so it meant nothing.

She smiled at each of them again, and then, on feet that seemed to float

through the ground, she turned toward the door.

"Kagome."

She stopped.

It was Fuyu who had said it. Kagome blinked slowly, trying to process the old woman's words, but they were too loud, too flat in the mist, and she couldn't quite understand what was happening. Distantly, Kagome felt her brow draw down in a light, curious puzzlement, and she cast a glance back over her shoulder.

The old woman's back was hunched, and the look she gave Kagome was one that was hard to recognize but easy to know. Here eyes were hunted.

There was a long pause, and there were words floating in and out, between them, but Kagome couldn't hear them any more, because they weren't important, but oh, she wished, lightly, absently, that they were.

Then, without warning, the old woman broke her gaze and turned toward the fire.

"Don't break," she said, voice flat and hollow, her eyes fixed on the dancing of the flame in front of her.

For a moment the heroine was speechless, was Kagome again, and she hurt, but the future would meet her whether she wanted it or not, so she had no choice.

I can't break, she thought. Heroines don't.

And really, there was no guarantee that she would live long enough to even crack.

Kagome nodded her head once, sharply, and then turned away from them and walked out the door into the rain.

She was never certain how she got across the courtyard or down the steps - nothing seemed real, and she was high on adrenaline and sleeplessness - but

Sesshoumaru was waiting for her when she arrived.

Her steps came to a stop, and she looked at him in the dimmest of light; she couldn't see his face, only his form, but that was of no importance.

"Okay," she said to him.

He didn't reply.

Instead she saw him, just blackness on blackness, silently turn and kneel. After a moment her trembling, breathless hands found him in the dark.

Then Sesshoumaru scooped her up and took off into the sky.

* * *

They flew on in silence for hours, though it was difficult to measure the passing of time as the night turned toward the dawn; it seemed that all of Japan was under grey skies tonight, and Kagome wished that this lovely bit of symbolism had survived the years and the transcriptions into the story that she had read. She might have brought a raincoat, if she had known.

She was tired, too. She hadn't had any sleep since the previous morning, and adrenaline would only carry her so far. If she was going to do the job she had to do, and if she had to do it now, then sleep was a good idea and so for most of the trip Kagome dozed with her head on Sesshoumaru's shoulder.

Meanwhile Sesshoumaru was trying to sort through the threads of turmoil in his head, which was odd since everything was actually very simple.

Send Kagome to Edo. Go home. Kill everyone. Get on with life.

See? Simple.

I have no obligation. No obligation, no obligation, no obligation, he thought, over and over. That he felt as though he had an obligation did not mean that he actually had one. It meant he was simply not in his right mind at the moment.

And there was still that damnable feeling, curled up in the recesses of his head, that something was amiss.

Sesshoumaru ignored it, and raced on.

The sun was hidden, but he guessed it was just past midday when the smell of the village - unwashed human, sewage, and yes sickness all over - slammed into him, like a wall. He would have coughed were he not clenching his teeth and keeping a tight grip on himself. Sesshoumaru scowled.

Kagome was still sleeping on him. It was the third time she had fallen asleep on him, he noted, and he was indifferently disappointed to say that the first two times had been markedly more pleasant. Sesshoumaru also thought, in a vaguely distracted way, that she was awfully trusting for a creature who had, without warning, shut him out of herself.

She was leaving though. He could not find it in him to be petulant.

Her slender, well muscled legs were warm beneath his hands. Gingerly, he jostled her.

Kagome immediately came to life. "Mm?" she said drowsily. He felt the weight of her head leave his shoulder.

"We have arrived," he said curtly. With strange detachment he found himself wishing that she were already gone, that leaving was already over. He wished that he didn't have to actually walk away.

Kagome did not appear to take issue with his abrupt tone. Instead she simply said "thank you" and slid from his back to the ground.

The road was wet and slippery - the compact dirt was slathered in a thin film of mud - and the sky above was a dirty grey that made him itch to sweep the clouds away from the sun. He watched dispassionately as Kagome scrubbed the sleep out of her eyes and adjusted her belongings.

Finally she looked up at him.

Sesshoumaru swayed, a sense of vertigo sending him reeling inside his head.

He had been so close to falling into her just a few hours ago, and now that the time for that - for everything between them - had passed, he ached all over. His head ached, his groin ached, his stomach ached, his fingers ached, and she wasn't helping, didn't seem to notice it at all, which was wrong, wrong, wrong because she was the only person who knew him.

But Kagome was still smiling innocently, as if everything was fine.

For a brief moment, Sesshoumaru gave in and shut his eyes.

This is fine. This is fine. This is how it should be. Fine, fine, fine -

God, yes, all right, okay, it was fine, but it also wasn't and he wanted, irrationally, to reach out and shake her back into the scared, sensual woman he wanted, the wise girl that he knew so well, because this creature in front of him was so flat and dull, so not-Kagome that he felt as though she were already dead.

Sharp shattered edges grated over his insides, and Sesshoumaru strained to hear her say the right words, except he had no idea what the right words were.

He opened his eyes as, in front of him, she shifted from foot to foot. There was no distance any more, not at all, and he strove to keep his face blank, to keep emotion from his eyes, and tried to shut her out as thoroughly as she had him.

She seemed to be waiting for him to do something.

But there was nothing to do, nothing to say, because, even if she lived - and she might, he whispered to himself - there was too much between them to pick up where they had left off, and if she died - and she might not, oh please she might not - anything more would leave things unfinished, frayed and incomplete, just another hole that would never be filled.

And so Sesshoumaru said nothing. Instead, he fixed his eyes on the dirty grey horizon and walked right past her without a word.

Kagome swallowed as he brushed by - the cool, damp silk of his sleeve ghosted over the back of her hand as he passed - but perhaps it was best that he said nothing to her. She was just a burden to him, had been all along, really. If she had been wiser, he would still be secure and stable, right where he belonged. He was merely washing his hands of her, and so there couldn't be a final, fond farewell.

None of this was important.

Kagome closed her eyes.

Against her will, she felt a tickle at the back of her throat that seemed dangerously like the beginning of the descent into despair, and she would have been alarmed if she hadn't known, didn't accept the way things had to be. There was no point in her caring, so she didn't...

He was behind her. His back was probably to hers, both of them acknowledging that this last moment was unimportant. They were over, and that was the way it was.

The end.

But -

"Sesshoumaru."

Silence crashed in.

All around the air grew thick, and Kagome realized that she had spoken without meaning to do so, had not imagined her voice, had not simply entertained the idea of tasting his name one last time.

Over and over his name whispered and repeated inside her head, like snow falling heavily from branches into the stillness, like pebbles tumbling down a mountainside.

She could feel him waiting. At the edge of her mind, Kagome thought she could hear the breath that he had trapped in his lungs at the sound of his name on her lips.

But no, now was not the time to want, or need, or care, or -

"Sesshoumaru," she said, staring at the road in front of her, her own words startling her. With a detachment that slowly dissolved with each word, she listened to herself speak.

"Sesshoumaru, promise me that you'll not lose everything," Kagome said, heart numbly twisting and tossing in her chest. "Promise me that you'll win."

She didn't care, right? She didn't care, it didn't matter, she didn't care -

She heard him snort, a strange noise that she had not expected to hear from him again, but she knew exactly what he meant by it, and, unbidden, a small, amused smile surfaced.

A smile.

Alarmed, Kagome inhaled sharply, fought to suppress it. Smiles were not allowed, because no one cared if the heroine was happy or amused or sad -

- she heard the sound of breathing -

She was dizzy, so dizzy, and she dimly registered the fluttering of her eyelids as she struggled for the control that only came from refusing to struggle.

Don't start missing him now, she thought fiercely. Don't think things will be different just because you want them to be. This has already happened, this is destiny, this has already happened, this is fate, this has already happened, this is done -

But even as she thought these things she knew she was slipping. Her serenity, her enlightenment wavered, and though she knew that grasping for it would only end in it slipping further away she could not help but try.

You don't regret anything, she told herself, knowing that any moment now it would all hit her, you have his memories and that is enough. Enough!

He had to be gone, she had to make him leave before she lost it.

When she was certain her voice was neutral, meant nothing, betrayed nothing, she spoke.

"Goodbye," she said.

The end.

But -

It seemed that he remained there, behind her, for a very long time, and Kagome knew that even though she was on the road to Edo, on the road to where she would end, she also knew that roads always went both ways - but people weren't supposed to look back, so no power in the world could transform the direction of the path she had to tread -

"Kagome," he said.

Kagome could not reply, could not turn around. She could only stand and listen to the tiny heartbeat -

- the sound of waiting -

The breeze picked up, rustled his silk haori, his silken hair.

She heard herself breathing.

And then -

"Like the morning," he said at last.

- it all came tumbling down.

"You smell like morning to me."

And then he was gone.

* * *

Kagome stood in the middle of the road, perfectly still, for a very long time, her peace and resolve irrevocably shattered, all her revelation gone with his words.

Like morning, she thought.

Like morning.

She trembled.

God, it was so stupid how his withholding of that one answer had assumed such importance, and now that his secret was finally shared, there was nothing left. Everything had been done.

She could not turn. She knew, intellectually, that he was gone, and yet she could still see him in her head, standing poised and pristine in the middle of the muddy path that went both ways. In her mind's eye, she could still see the soft liquid fall of his hair, the shine of his clothes, the perfect boredom of the beautiful face that hid him from her. And yet perhaps the memory of him that remained was more truthful than the hole in the world she knew she would see if she turned around.

Because, really, it was never his absence that had made him unreachable.

She thought all her regrets had disappeared when she had accepted her fate, but that was wrong, so wrong. There seemed to be something lodged at the back of her mouth, as though all her unsaid words had crawled out of the darkness of her heart and into her throat, begging to be voiced before she reached breathlessness, reached voicelessness, reached nothingness.

Eyes wide and unseeing, Kagome stared at the ground, to which all things returned, and, filled with trembling, awestruck horror, she thought: Is this how a life ends?

It just stops?

At the base of her throat was a knot so huge that she could not breathe, could not even cry around it. It hurt.

She was an idiot. She hadn't been enlightened, hadn't accepted her fate at all, and yes, yes, she wanted him to fight with her, wanted him to choose to be with her in the heat of battle - not out of pity or mercy, but because he cared, just like she cared for him. But maybe he didn't care at all, and that was even worse than pity.

She had to go on without him, even though she found the idea so, so frightening.

Miserably, Kagome studied the mud beneath her shoes and wondered why she was so lost. She used to jump right into battle, not caring for the consequences or for her own wellbeing, always trying to help her friends, always putting her life on the line for strangers that she didn't even know - where had that fearless girl gone? What had happened to her between then and now?

I want a happy ending, she realized suddenly. Haven't I earned a goddamn happy ending yet? I don't want to fight, because if I die then I'll never find one.

But, really, she knew that no such thing existed, so even if she didn't fight, even if she didn't die, even if she waited forever, she still wouldn't find one.

There is no happy ending for me.

Angrily, Kagome clenched her fists.

God, she wished she was in a story. If she were a character in a story, she might get it right for once. She was supposed to be good and strong, noble and kind, without doubt or sadness, but that was never how it had been.

Her arrows sometimes missed, she hurt people, was needy and dependent, and the only thing she had ever really been good at was holding the hero up when he faltered, and in the end she hadn't even been allowed to do that. At best, she was just a supporting character.

Somewhere in the distance, over the horizon, thunder mumbled feebly to itself.

Kagome squeezed her fists tighter and felt the skin pull across the backs of her fingers.

Then she blinked.

For a moment she didn't move, but then, slowly, as if she were afraid of startling herself, Kagome let her hands float up to her face and stared at them.

Shining white scar tissue stared back at her.

Dazedly she unfolded her fingers, and she felt as if she were seeing her own hands for the first time: every nail was cracked and broken, each fleshy ridge was tough and calloused, and scars slipped and slid over the skin, pooled in hollows, gleaming silver.

The wakazashi weighed heavily at her hip.

After a moment Kagome let her hands fall. Of its own accord her left hand settled lightly on the hilt of her sword.

Ah, she thought.

She was standing in the middle of the road to Edo. She knew that she could glance back, right now. She could turn her gaze to the path behind, over her shoulder, and wait for her destiny to meet her; she was good at that. She'd had a lot of practice.

But she didn't have to. And maybe she wasn't a very good heroine, but she wasn't just a supporting character, either.

Kagome smiled.

Then she slowly tilted her head back, gazed up at the grey sky as it settled in between the damp branches above her, and, face to the clouds, stepped forward.

Strange how easy it was. She lowered her chin and looked forward, setting a brisk pace.

There were no sounds around her - the air was heavy and almost oily, and no wind stirred the leaves above. In the trees the birds were silent.

Perhaps another storm was coming, Kagome thought idly. She hoped it would hold off until she finished her battle.

She walked onward.

Ten minutes later Kagome crested a hill and found the path sloping away into a field. Beyond the grass Edo hunkered down, clinging to the ground as if the whole village was afraid of falling off the world. Kagome hesitated for a moment at the top of the path, then quickly shucked her backpack from her shoulder and hid it behind some bushes. Then she checked her bow and quiver - full - and continued on.

This was the place she had seen the dark spirit feeding from people. The pile of corpses was gone, but their scent lingered, and the stench of sickness still hung in the air. Before, Kagome would have gagged, but it appeared that all that work she did for Fuyu had inured her to such things.

There was a small child playing in the dirt outside one of the sick-huts, and she looked up as Kagome approached. Before Kagome had a chance to smile reassuringly at the little girl the child gave a small scream and leapt to her feet.

Kagome stopped, startled.

What the - ?

A woman hurried out of the hut, took one look at the miko standing bewildered in the middle of the field, and scooped the child up and took off running in the opposite direction.

After a moment, Kagome heard some shouts in the distance, and then, at the edge of her consciousness, something cold and dark stirred, and she remembered the feel of the eyes that followed her when she fled to the west.

There were more people, mostly men, running down the path from the village, and Kagome was shocked to see that each man held a wicked-looking farm

implement, and the scowls on their faces told her that they were not adverse to using them. Given that they were all staring at her, it was probably not a terribly large logical leap to assume that they were considering the benefits of using them on her.

That's not right, she thought, her bewilderment taking her away from herself. This wasn't how the story went, but, more importantly, she was here to help them.

Clearly, they did not think so, and despite herself, Kagome almost took a step backwards. Her bow and quiver on her back seemed heavy and awkward, and her wakazashi was small, and there were a lot of them. Their sullen silence rang loud in her ears.

Then the silence was broken by a murmuring in the crowd, and then, like waves, they parted.

The madoushi was strolling towards her, staff in hand, serene expression on her face. On either side of her, villagers turned and bowed deeply, and Kagome could almost feel the admiration and reverence rolling off them in waves.

Idiots, she thought with sudden ferocity. You complete idiots.

What would happen after she won? Would she be mobbed? Would she be able to explain? Would they even listen if she did?

Her stomach lurched.

In front of her the sorceress in miko's clothing stepped into the field beyond Edo and drifted to a stop. Behind her, Kagome could hear the crowd muttering excitedly to itself, and then a man detached himself from the gathering and approached the madoushi, his posture one of deference.

"Shina-sama," Kagome heard him say, "we will help defend - "

The sorceress waved her hand, silencing him, though she never lost her tranquil expression; she watched Kagome with eyes as still as the sky above, waiting for the storm.

Kagome stared back.

Suddenly, with a sharp movement, the sorceress drove her staff into the ground at her feet.

"Do not bring your evil here!" she shouted, her voice booming but queerly flat in the still air. Then the stillness cracked along its seams as she clapped her hands together and brought them to her chest, as if she really were a holy woman, gathering her pure power to oust the demon.

Kagome felt a strange sucking against her skin, as if the air were inhaling, and across the ground, down the trunks of the trees, out of the mouths of the crowd, from the sick-huts, from everywhere crept that horrid blackness, the malevolence that feasted on misery. It met itself behind the sorceress.

Could it feel her sadness? Could it taste it? Could it draw strength from her?

If you cannot fight, you must run, Kazuo had said, and if you cannot run, you must fight.

There was no mindless panic now. She had dangled high above the darkness of man, seen despair and death, witnessed fear of self and fear of life, and this black hatred was no longer a shock to her.

A little smile tugged at her lips. Was this what you intended to happen, Fuyu-sama, she thought, or is this just an unintended consequence of growing up?

She was not entirely without fear, though. A small pain registered dimly in her battle-sharpened brain, and Kagome glanced down to see her hand clenching the hilt of her sword so hard she was cutting off her own circulation. Slowly she eased her grip. The sword was part of her, Kazuo had said. It was just an extension of her.

Control was key. Control was everything.

Kagome took one deep, long breath.

The sorceress pulled her staff from the ground and gripped it tightly in her left

hand, holding it out in front of her, parallel to the ground. Her right hand hovered in front of her face, fingertips pointed straight towards heaven.

Kagome's feet shifted of their own accord, planting her firmly against the ground, and she felt something in her spine stiffen, felt her shoulders square. Her jaw was set, and over and over inside her head she sang and echoed:

I will not break. I will not break. I will not break.

Then the madoushi smiled, sending Kagome's skin crawling - not because it was evil or cruel, but because it looked so kind - and suddenly there was no more time left as, like slow-motion lightning, the blackness drew together. It was massive, so massive, and so evil it was a wonder the people clustered behind the sorceress, at the edge of the village were not crushed by the weight, and then she saw it crest, high above them.

It shed its misty form, contracted, solidified, turned towards her -

- oh, shit -

- and struck.

Kagome ran.

It chased.

She remembered.

Don't think. Just... go.

So she did.

Her legs churned as she plowed through the grass, feeling it tug at her clothing, but she leaned into it, didn't let it slow her strides.

The thing loomed up on her right, still foggy, not quite there, not quite solid, not quite a target, and Kagome veered into it as it drew itself together. It drew away, fell back.

This is a weapon, Kagome thought.

The madoushi was using it as a weapon, and suddenly it was no different than a sword. If she could injure it, if she could 'deflect' it, then she could use that tiny slice of time to reach the sorceress. One good parry; that was all it would take.

Come get me, she thought. She was scared, but it was just a feeling, just a high thin note in her head. It had nothing to do with this battle.

She waited for the downstroke, for that one moment of opportunity.

A breath, in -

Her shoes bit into the carpet of grass beneath her, sending her flying across the field, and all the while she concentrated, focused, felt its cold-burning evil as it dissolved and reformed, rolling across the field.

- and out.

It was right behind her now, and then she could feel it, right there, felt it stretch and reach -

Kagome flung herself backwards

- into the thing -

- escaped the blow -

- her sword screamed out of the scabbard, whirling around -

- it wasn't solid any longer, had released its form, was just blackness moving in, and her lungs were filled with acid, with foul fog -

- she landed, twirled, ankle twisting, the turf tearing underneath her toes -

- pushed off -

- and ran.

The thing reared up, moved out and around her, but she twisted again, darting out into the field. The thing was trying to herd her into the forest, but there was no way she was going in there; if she was going to shoot it, she had to have a clear line of sight, and she was not going to let them take that away from her.

Have to get past it, she thought. Have to buy just a little bit of time.

She ran a wide arc, watched as the thing rolled in, cut her path sharply and ran past it, sword at ready, waiting to catch it when it was once again tangible.

She felt the thing heave, and then it was thin and translucent, just a faint black mist before she saw it draw together, further down the field, perfectly poised to cut her off again.

Cursing, Kagome pounded towards it, watched as it cut into her path, and veered away, towards the trees. The thing changed direction and tried to follow her, but she ran a tight loop and shot towards the village again -

- it tried to grab her, or slow her down, winding long, tendrils of fog around her body, waiting for the right moment to become solid -

- but she lashed out, and the thing recoiled from her blade, giving her the tiny moment she needed to run straight through the burning foulness. It stayed misty, maneuvered again, and it was just an evil spirit, not really a god, more like a ghost, but it seemed frightened of being injured.

Good, she thought.

She leapt forward again.

Again and again she tried to dart forward, tried to circumvent it, tried to trick it into making a wrong move, but it never did. It dodged and ducked, recoiled, but never did it make a mistake, never did leave an open path to the sorceress, and Kagome could hear the villagers cheering, and she wanted to scream. They were cheering on their own demise, and for a few moments anger spurred her forward.

It didn't last very long, though. Her lungs labored, trying to take in the sharp, jagged air.

The world became fuzzy. She was getting tired.

Desperately she ran, and her feet slipped on patches of mud, leapt of their own accord over rocks that her conscious brain barely acknowledged. Each landing shook her frame, but still she kept going, her feet pushing off from undulations of the landscape, launching her forward on burning muscles.

Thick locks of hair had escaped from their binding to plaster themselves to her sweat-soaked skin and her hakama clung to her legs, itching. The sound of gasping reached her ears, though it was hard to hear over the roar of blood.

She gripped her sword with both hands.

Still the darkness pursued her.

Dammit!

There was no way at all for her to win this without a huge gamble. Her entire training had been based around not taking gambles, had hammered into her brain the knowledge that if she didn't play it safe she wouldn't survive long enough to win, but she couldn't run forever.

The air was so thick with dead rain that she was drowning. Her clothes clung to her, and she was burning up. The circuits in her brain were shorting out, one by one.

She was going to have to charge the thing, was going to have to throw herself straight into it.

This had never been planned, but she couldn't run any more, so she had to fight, had to.

And suddenly both feet were slipping on the grass, skidding to a stop, tearing up the sod.

From far away, she felt her legs tremble.

Kagome whirled and faced the darkness.

It was coming for her. It was big and tireless and it sucked at her heart, wringing it dry, though there wasn't much left there for it to feed on.

The time had come to gamble, and she had to put everything at stake.

Kagome braced her legs, tightened her grip on her sword, and concentrated…

The world felt so bitter around her, inside her, that for a long moment she thought it wouldn't work, and then the blade flared to life, bright and holy, and her muscles jerked, slid beneath her skin.

She darted forward. There was yelling, many voices rising up, but she didn't pay any attention to them.

The blackness loomed.

I'm going to die, Kagome thought.

Tiny tears pricked her eyes. Angrily, she blinked them away, kept running, running, running -

Long black tendrils snaked out, surrounded her, embraced her in loving, diaphanous arms.

And then, so, so irrationally, so inappropriately, she thought, I hope I don't pee my pants when it kills me - that would be so embarrassing.

For a moment Kagome's world was silent, but then she laughed the saddest laugh she'd ever heard, felt the cruel freedom of letting go, of throwing everything into a single moment, and she flew forward to meet her destiny in the darkness -

- a familiar flash of light lanced across her path, slicing through the black mist, and she stumbled, slowed, felt the thing shriek in pain -

- and then she was free of it, the darkness streaming away, up and up, high

into the sky, still shrieking its rage.

The yelling was louder now, was full of screaming. Feet stampeded, tears fell, and she could finally hear what they were saying, had heard it so many times in the past, and her heart locked itself in the back of her mouth.

She turned.

High above her, Sesshoumaru flowed across the sky, silver and white and brilliant and shining, and she thought, he always had to make a grand entrance, and then she thought, he left me.

This can't be real.

Everything that was Kagome - all her thoughts and fears, her heart and body, all her never-ending hope and long-cherished desires - held its breath, waited for him to disappear, he couldn't be real, but then she saw the darkness rear up and he surged into it, headlong. And then she heard him snarl, feral, vicious, and suddenly everything in her was ablaze.

There was shouting and panic in the village behind the sorceress, but Kagome didn't care about them any more. Instead, she turned and looked at the girl that had ruined the people who worshipped her, and tasted her fear.

The sorceress watched the battle in the air with horror, her eyes wide, her hands alighted on her cheeks.

She was scared, and it was good.

You'd better be.

High above, Sesshoumaru darted through the air, his sword just a dull blur against the grey clouds, just a brightness in the dark, and below him, in the late summer field, Kagome felt the story flowing past her, the under-current tugging her feet towards her destiny, pushing her towards the end, but he was here, here for her, and she didn't know why, and afterwards she could strangle him and beat him senseless, could hold him close, could pull him down into the grass with her, but right now - right now -

Now it was the time to make an afterwards.

Happy endings don't exist because the world keeps turning -

- the words burned across her brain, and she was already running, full tilt, target before her -

- but you don't have to have an ending -

- so far away, but he was here, and she gulped air, her heart thundering forward into the future -

- to be happy.

Whatever they could have afterwards, whatever dark, soft friendship, whatever bright camaraderie they could share was waiting for her, just beyond the end, but she had to step up and claim it, if she only dared.

She had never killed a human being before, but for the after that she wanted so desperately she thought she could kill a hundred of them.

It was selfish, not good or pure at all, but Kagome didn't care any longer. It was just the madoushi that blocked the after, and there was no shame in killing her.

Kagome wasn't going to wait around for the future any longer, wasn't even going to step forward meet it - she was going to take it.

Her opponent was still frozen in place, as if she couldn't take her eyes from the sight above her.

That's right, Kagome thought, just keep watching.

And the sorceress must have heard her footfalls, or seen her from the corner of her eye, but by the time she turned, by the time she stuck her hand up her sleeve, fingers frantically groping for a knife to throw, Kagome was upon her.

As though she were moving in glue, Kagome lifted her sword, angled the blade, leaned in, threw her weight behind it.

The madoushi shrieked, and Kagome stared her in the eye -

- and jerked away.

The sword caught, and she wanted to throw up.

She could feel it slip through muscle, could feel it hit bone, and the sorceress kept on screaming, but Kagome had missed her target, hadn't slid the sword through the girl's soft stomach like Kazuo had told her to. Instead, she had almost sliced clean through the girl's arm, and Kagome thought, desperately, that it was enough.

The sorceress only had to be in pain, incapacitated, for just a moment, because it only took a moment to seal the spirit, and - and - afterwards she would figure out what to do, would discover a way to keep the two apart, and yes, yes, yes it was fine, no need to turn and make another slice -

She rocketed past the screaming girl.

Kagome dropped the sword - there was no time to resheath it, she had so little time as it was - and she didn't even register her hands reaching to her shoulder, but suddenly her bow was in her grip, an arrow nocked and ready.

Kagome skidded to a stop, nearly broke her ankle, whirled, aimed.

She didn't want to hit Sesshoumaru, but time was short; she needed to trust that he would get out of the way. He was good at that.

She had one shot.

The thing solidified, quivered against the clouds.

- and then -

Pain. Throat. Lanced through, burned. Pain up, pain down, pain pain pain.

Kagome opened her mouth, gulped for air -

- couldn't breathe.

No, she thought.

Something rattled in her chest.

There was metal in her mouth, in her gagging tongue, but nothing came up.

She tried to heave.

More pain blossomed at the base of her throat, and she tried to gasp, but couldn't breathe, couldn't breathe, couldn't fucking breathe.

The skin of her chest was hot, damp, and now she couldn't taste anything at all, couldn't smell, couldn't breathe -

And so.

There was no way to win now, she could only draw, and there were so many people, and she wanted to say I'm sorry, and don't cry, and I wish -

No breath, no tears, couldn't sob anyway, could only scream his name in the panicked silence of her head, and now she truly only had one shot to get it right, had always only had one shot, had already missed so many times.

Some things in life can't be done over again. Especially the end.

The end.

The world was going grey, her brain was shrieking, and something broke inside her -

- and by her cheek her arrow burst into holy flames so bright it was as though she had drawn the sun from the sky and imprisoned it in her hands.

Like morning, she thought distantly while blackness crept in at the edge of her vision, but it couldn't fool her, couldn't trick her, because she could feel the real darkness high above where it burned a hole in the world.

This time, this one time, she would not fail, not because she was the heroine, not because it was her responsibility, but because it was for him.

Kagome aimed, and fired.

Even as high above as he was, Sesshoumaru had felt the heat of her power burning on the ground, could smell that bright smell, and it cut through the focused daze of the fight, jerked him out of the chase and the hunt.

Danger! his senses screamed, and he only had moment to get out of the way -

- he felt her release, and his heart slammed into the roof of his mouth -

- straining, he flipped backwards into the sky.

The burning arrow ripped through the air, and that black thing was dissolving, trying to escape, but there was no escape for it, not any more.

Sesshoumaru threw an arm over his face, flinched, saw the blaze of Kagome's purity light up the world behind his eyelids, and then his body jerked and the breath left his lungs as he was blasted backwards by the force of it.

He smelled burned silk, felt the free-floating malevolence of the thing disappear, and after a silent second he lowered his arm.

She hadn't sealed it.

It was simply gone.

Sesshoumaru hung in the air for a moment, stunned. Toukijin still burned in his hand; his claws dripped acid.

Damn, he thought.

And then, Damn!

She'd nearly killed him! Or grievously injured him, at the very least, and that simply would not do, not at all, and something bubbled in his chest. Swiftly, quietly it dawned on him that now was the time to start thinking of excuses,

was time to compose himself before he landed, because it was ridiculous that he would come back just because of her, because he hadn't, obviously, he had plenty of good reasons -

- and he was just so goddamned relieved -

The stench of blood hit his nose.

The world slowed to an agonizing crawl.

And Sesshoumaru turned in the air just in time to see Kagome hit the ground, a dagger buried in her throat.

For my beta readers, Technoelfie and Cinnamongrrl, who are good and kind to me and I don't deserve them. And for Orin, who won the devArt contest with an entry so gorgeous that I am never allowed to be unhappy again.

Thus ends arc three.

Tales from the House of the Moon
by
Resmiranda

Chapter Thirty-Four

"When you die they make a list
of every love you never kissed,
of each regret and each mistake,
every choice you failed to make."
- Barenaked Ladies, "Next Time"

* * *

And now there is memory.

...not a memory of how she came to be standing here on the shady bank of the burbling stream, for she has always been here, but a memory of before.

The memory is a name.

Of course, like any name, that is not all that it is. The one who wears it now has worn many others, and will wear many more. It has many meanings to many people. This one is hers. No one will ever know this name as she does.

She turns, looks over her shoulder to the flowery, sunlit field, and calls:

"Sesshoumaru?"

Her voice doesn't echo across the meadow; instead, it is swallowed by the sunlight, seamlessly slipping into eerie silence. A tiny thread of doubt winds through her. The memories are fuzzy, and the name tastes sweet and strange.

"Sesshoumaru?" she calls again, squinting at the bright world beyond the bowed shade of the mossy slope where she stands. There is no answer for her. The name was a quiet one, she remembers, but for some reason unknown even to herself, she feels certain that he would respond were he there.

She suspects that she is waiting for him. But the name seems as though it was a dream, and she wonders if it was real -

"Ah, no more yelling," Inuyasha says from behind her.

She turns back to the gentle slope and the winding creek. At its edge, Inuyasha sprawls lazily on his back, dangling his toes in the water. His head is pillowed

in his hands, his black hair spilling over his arms. He is craning his neck to see her.

"Um," she says. "I was just... I'm waiting for him?" She is not quite sure of what she is doing, or why she is here.

Inuyasha waves a hand. "Keh! He's always late. You should know that by now, Kagome."

Kagome feels a flash of annoyance. "Well," she says, "why do you think I'm calling him, then?"

Inuyasha just snorts.

"Don't be rude, Inuyasha," Miroku says. "It's been a while. Give her a minute or two."

The former monk's hands are busy, Kagome notes, and there is no seal now. He sits crosslegged on a boulder a little ways away from the water, whittling away at a block of wood as he carves something that she can't identify, and for some reason she thinks that he looks older than she remembers. Which is silly, since he is as old as he should be.

Feeling a little dizzy, she shakes her head, as though to clear it. Is this the dream? she wonders. It seems real, but then so do the memories - this name is mine, and this one is hanyou, and that one is a holy pervert, and - and they are so dim and strange that she cannot look directly at them before they slide away.

"I think... I should go look for him..." she says, not at all certain, which is strange, because she was almost certain a moment ago. Perhaps she only remembers being certain, though, so who is to say that she ever knew anything at all?

"Bah!" Inuyasha barks. "I'll never know what you see in him!"

Sango looks up from the game of go that she is playing with herself and lobs a stone at him.

"Ow!" Inuyasha announces to the world, rubbing his head - she'd managed a good hit right above his temple. "That hurt!"

Sango is unimpressed. "Stop that!" she admonishes him. "The only reason we're still here is because you wanted to wait. The least you can do is be civil."

Inuyasha pauses in the act of throwing the go stone back at her and blinks. Taking advantage of his confusion, Miroku leans over and plucks it from his fingers before gently lobbing it back to his wife. Inuyasha does not appear to care.

"Oh yeah," he says. "I almost forgot."

Sango pulls her best exasperated face. "How could you forget!" she cries, brandishing the stone. "That's why we've been sitting here killing time!"

"Hey, I've been here longer!" Inuyasha snaps back. "It gets fuzzy, okay?"

Sango makes a frustrated noise, and Kagome can see a little smile on Miroku's lips as he carefully shaves off another curl of wood. It is a loving smile, affectionate and warm. In her mind, the name she might remember or might have dreamed seems to flare up, like fire, and she turns again to look over her shoulder -

"I guess you don't want to come with us," Inuyasha says.

"Um," she replies, turning back. He is standing, stretching out his muscles. Sango is packing her game, and Miroku is carefully stowing his carving in his sleeve. Inuyasha looks up at her with his dark eyes.

Somewhere deep inside her, more dreamy memories stir, but they are not about the name that slides on her tongue, but instead -

- long afternoons and blood and cookfires and flying and furry ears and swords and curses and spiders and dogs and foxes and wolves and the walking dead and broken jewels and groping hands and sisterly hugs and white hair and fear and happiness and past lives and past thoughts and past hopes and all the things that are gone -

"Well?" he says, and her breath trips over itself. For some reason, her fingers are shaking as she fiddles with her sleeves.

"What?" she replies, but her voice is dim, and she watches as the summery past rises up to meet her -

"Are you coming or not?"

Her feet twitch, but she does not move.

Wasn't this how it had always been? This was where she is meant to be, is it not? It feels so right, and they're all here -

- except -

"Where is Shippou?"

There is a shuffling of feet.

"He'll catch up," Inuyasha says. "Don't worry about him."

And she thinks, It was not like this.

And now she really notices the differences.

Now Sango is slightly plumper, slightly more matronly - but you were always a girl, Kagome thinks, except for that time when you weren't - and she seems almost at peace. There is a kusarigama shoved into her obi. She does not carry hiraikotsu, and Kirara is nowhere to be seen.

Now Miroku has no seal upon his hand, but there is still a hole in the center. He no longer wears his holy attire though his clothes are the same color as the robes in which he always traveled, and his staff is still with him, but it is tarnished and misshapen in places. He looks middle aged, and he was never that way in the dream - or is this the dream?

And now Inuyasha is human.

Which is not how it was, until the end.

- and over and over, all her memories tumble together, torn and treasured and -

"You look different," Kagome finally says, helplessly.

At her words, they become still.

"So do you," Inuyasha says, after a moment.

So Kagome looks down at herself, and she thinks, But this is me...

"I - " She glances back up at him, feeling a little breathless, and a little sad. "I was in love with you..."

And for a moment there is a little bit of pain in his face, a little bit of the anger she saw when they met for the very first time, and now there is one thing that Kagome knows for certain: she never wants to see that expression on his face again.

Then it is gone and he nods. "Yeah," he says. "Me, too."

And now she remembers it all, so she realizes that her hakama are the same shade of green as her school uniform, as are the threads running through her haori, but everything else is of another time. There is even a wakazashi at her hip. So she looks at the one who was named Inuyasha, and she thinks, This was the color I wore when I was with you. But the clothes are different. So is the hair. So is the face.

So is the heart.

Her legs are trembling beneath the weight of some knowledge that she doesn't understand. She takes a step back and shakily lowers herself to the ground.

"Um..." she says slowly. "I need to wait for Shippou. And... him... I think I need to stay here - "

To her gratified astonishment he just smiles - the genuine smile that was so rare when they traveled the world together - and bounds up the slope. Before

she can say anything, she is wrapped in his arms, and the embrace is so sweet and warm that she thinks she might cry, because even though the heart is different now, it still remembers the time when it wasn't. But for once, it is all right.

Then he withdraws and stumbles back down the banks, and why did she not notice how the colors were so pale and bright, and how did she not see the little bridge that crosses the stream? They could wade through the shallow water if they wanted to, but instead Miroku kisses Sango and takes her hand, and Kagome can only watch as they step onto the bridge -

- and she thinks, insanely, that they step up into -

- and fade.

"Catch up with us!" Inuyasha calls, and he turns, and steps onto the bridge -

She cannot watch. She holds onto the ground, as if she will fall off, and shuts her eyes so tightly that she sees stars.

A gentle hand falls over her own.

She opens her eyes, and Inuyasha is no longer there.

Kagome turns.

And sitting there next to her, looking sweet and sad and peaceful - the way she must have looked in life before Kagome had known her, the way she must have looked after Kagome had returned her to her love in that strange thing that might have been a dream - is Kikyou.

"Kagome," Kikyou says.

The world stops.

In the sudden cacophony of silence Kikyou's voice echoes all around, and in it all the things that Kagome does and does not want to know are gently laid bare.

It is the saddest thing she has ever heard.

* * *

By the time Sesshoumaru landed, Kagome was dead.

He touched down maybe twenty meters away from her body, but there was no doubt in his mind; he had seen too many dead bodies to make a mistake so fundamental. Her heart had ceased, her lungs had stilled, and her brain had already given its last commands, though the final moments between consciousness and death had probably been mercifully obliterated by lack of oxygen. She had crumpled gracelessly. Her haori was crimson with blood.

In the distant part of his mind where he still had some semblance of function, Sesshoumaru hazarded that her death had been caused from asphyxiation. The angle of the dagger was just right as to have severed a major artery as well as slice open her windpipe; it wasn't a stretch to guess that she had probably drowned in her own blood. She was most certainly dead.

Why, then, did he keep waiting for her to sit up?

Kagome - no, the body that had been Kagome - stared at him with glassy eyes.

The tiny part of him that still functioned started screaming. In the darkness of his head the ragged sound echoed against the nothingness.

Sesshoumaru waited for her to blink.

In a world that was entirely apart from him, there was noise and shouting. From the corner of his eye he saw villagers running slowly, so slowly, as if time had condensed into this one tiny moment, and they swept into the field towards -

- Sesshoumaru shifted his gaze and saw the young woman who also wore miko clothing stagger where she stood. A dagger identical to the one now buried in Kagome's throat dropped from her fingers.

The sorceress was very alive, and though the vile spirit had been destroyed he

could sense that she still retained a great amount of power. Now he could feel it swell and crackle, unleashed and erratic in her pain.

In slow motion the false priestess lifted her hand to the bloody gash in her arm.

But, god, why wasn't she dead? Wasn't it supposed to go the other way? Wasn't the sorceress supposed to be dead instead of Kagome? Wasn't the god supposed to be sealed instead of obliterated? How did the story go?

Well. The story said she would win, and she had. Even though the false priestess still had a power that set his teeth on edge, the darkness was lifted up and away from the village. She'd only had to kill one of them to break the hold, and she did. Kagome had succeeded.

Except she hadn't, and he had almost known that. He had turned back because of that damned story. He had run and run from her before his wild thoughts tripped over a memory. He remembered that she wished that this story would part from reality, like the others, and he had thought: all the other stories went wrong except this one.

Now there is nothing left to go wrong except the ending.

So he came back because it wouldn't have been right to let her go into battle without that warning, but he had been too late and she had been barreling headlong into the wrong ending so he had... intervened.

But that had just been an excuse. It was not a reason. It wasn't why.

Now she was dead, just as he thought she would be, and he had been fine, just fine with that, because he had learned long ago that postponing the inevitable only meant more grief in the end.

He had forgotten that knowing she might die and seeing it happen were two different things entirely.

And the world slowed so much that it was as though he had stepped outside of time, and there was so much shouting, and so much blood, and her eyes were open, and still Sesshoumaru waited for her to wake up -

* * *

- and Kagome feels as though she has opened her eyes, and then opened her eyes again.

Kikyou - she was never there. It feels wrong.

This cannot be the dream because it is real, and yet -

"Why aren't you going with Inuyasha?" she asks, feeling almost angry, irrational, why are you throwing away my sacrifice for you -

"He can wait a little longer," Kikyou says softly. "You cannot."

But I've waited so long, so long already -

Kagome shudders. It ripples through her, shaking her grief and sadness loose.

They echo in her body, and she can hear the truth in them.

"It wasn't a dream, was it?" she whispers.

Kikyou shakes her head.

Memories tumble down, of fires at night, of cold caves, of other golden eyes, of strong hands and striped skin and a foolish desire for forever, but there is no forever because -

I tried. I tried so hard, I worked so hard, but there was one second and I failed.

No no no.

"I'm dead, aren't I?" she asks, her voice choked and shaking with all the tears threatening to drown her words in her throat. This isn't how the story went, this was not how it was supposed to go, that had all been lies, this wasn't meant to happen. But it had.

She had really, truly died.

No no no.

Then Kikyou's face melts into a look of such sorrow and compassion that Kagome thinks she might breathe again, but the other miko turns away, to the serene little river, to the cruel little bridge.

In the pastel sky the pastel sun sparkles, and the lovely lying peace of the beautiful world-between-worlds stirs her grief and rage together in her gut, and she is going to scream with the weight of it all. Her fingers curl, and Kagome feels the pretty pastel grass crush and tear beneath her hands, her fingernails dragging little furrows behind them.

It was all a waste, everything was wasted, everything had broken, and it was all her fault.

Her throat closes on the wounded cry that she cannot suppress, and then Kikyou's hand closes around her fingers, soft and soothing.

"There is a choice," Kikyou says, and Kagome can also hear tears in the voice of her other self, of the one who was and was not her, who had twined so intimately with her that there was always a little wish to return -

Kagome struggles to comprehend. "A choice? You mean - like Inuyasha said - I have to choose to go back or go on? Is that it?"

But Kikyou is shaking her head again, and Kagome thinks she can see her lower lip trembling, just a little.

"Yes, but you have already made your decision. This one is not yours."

Kagome cannot understand. It hurts too much. "What do you mean?" she cries.

There are definitely tears in her eyes now. "This one," Kikyou tells her, "is his."

And the blood drains out of the world, leaving it suddenly barren and pale, and Kagome knows.

She knows.

Her voice is dust. Her heart is stripped bare, and she cannot not find the strength to seek the answer, but in the end she speaks the words.

"It's me, isn't it?" she asks. "It's me. I'm the madoushi, aren't I?"

There are no sounds around them now, or perhaps she can't hear them over the roaring in her ears, and now it makes so much horrible sense that it cannot be true but, oh, it is...

"I'm the one everyone will remember as evil."

She doesn't have to see Kikyou nod to know it is the truth, and the fairytale crawls treacherously across her mind: the sorceress could not be killed. If a fatal blow were struck, the god would revive her.

The god would revive her.

And -

- he is the god, he is the god, he is the god is the god is the god he will bring me back or let me die, and...

Oh, no no no...

And now, softly, Kagome wishes - so, so desperately that she might actually choose death if she can only do this one thing - she wishes that she had told him the things she'd kept in her heart, the only secrets she hadn't wanted him to find, but in the end it doesn't matter what she wishes for. All that matters is what she has done.

And it isn't fair. It isn't right.

"If he chooses me, they'll seal him away. They'll put him in a shrine." Her eyes are burning with tears unshed. She can feel her face collapse into an ugly look of agony.

There is a pained silence. "Yes," Kikyou finally whispers.

"And if he doesn't, I'll stay dead."

The other miko nods, but Kagome can't see her very well through the tears, and oh, god, even if this were not a choice that would seal his fate, it is so cruel to ask him to make this decision, because all that sword had ever brought him was grief, and if he... oh, if he feels anything at all, then this choice is just a choice between grief and grief again, and it is her fault, all her fault this time.

How will I face him? she screams inside the emptiness, and with revulsion she breaks herself, tries to put herself back together into someone who isn't so stupid and selfish, who would not have failed him so badly, and all the jagged pieces are torment -

* * *

- and now he couldn't gloss over her suffering, couldn't forget her blood-stained face, couldn't go on with the way things had been and still pretend that there was some small hope left that she would whirlwind her way back into his life again someday.

There was a certain lovely horror to it all. She hadn't been able to kill her opponent. She had spent a month learning the skill she needed, but in the end she could not break and remold her own will enough to be a killer; instead, she had faltered at the last possible moment, and he was glad, because at least she had died as herself -

- at his hip, Tenseiga weighed heavy -

- and this had always been an outcome. He had considered, in the murkiest parts of his brain where the wildness still ruled him, killing her himself. It would have been easy, and it would have made everything so much more simple, but now it was even simpler because the decision had been made for him.

Now he could return home and slaughter his enemies, and keep his firm grip on the power for which he had fought so hard, and would never again have to think about the strange woman from the future who had so thoroughly upset

everything that was him.

She would never come back.

There was a gust of wind across the grey field and then -

- everything was grey, and he could see the future in front of him, rolling away beneath his feet, spreading out like the landscape of a dead country.

He could see it all. Here was the monotony of each bloody, useless fight that he would win, and over there were the stupid, petty squabbles of the youkai who fought amongst themselves for a little parcel of his power; on the stifling breeze he could smell the tedious conspiracies that would brew behind his back, and he could even feel the dull weight of the hours and hours of drudgery inside that stifling little study, and all the dragging centuries of nothing that waited for him -

And suddenly Sesshoumaru wanted nothing more than to crawl out of his own bones and escape.

The wind tossed his hair and high above the clouds swept across the sky. The villagers were reaching the false priestess now, crowding around, pressing inwards, and there were already hands reaching for her arm as they clamored to tend to the wound that the real priestess had left in her flesh. None of them seemed to take any notice of him.

They certainly didn't take any notice of Kagome who had been so good and so naïve and who had tried so hard to fight for them.

Here was her payment, and she had been so damn foolish -

- but then again, so had he.

Really, she had been such a fanciful whim.

Inside the slow and weary moment, he took one step forward, felt his boots slide on the dry grass, felt the wind in his clothes, and she was still there, dead and dead and dead and dead.

There were always choices, and none of them easy, but he had always known that.

And he could break away from his father's shadow by turning around and walking away, back into the grey future, or he could follow in his father's footsteps and lose all he held so tightly for the momentary pleasure of her, and that was unthinkable, because he did not lose -

* * *

There is only one thing left to say.

"Why?" she wants to know, needs to know.

Endless drowning seconds pour over her before she hears Kikyou swallow.

"Because..." Kikyou says, voice low, and stops. "Because... there are some things we are fated to do. Because history is written by the ones who are left alive. Because that's the way the story goes."

That's the way the story goes, that's the way it goes, the story the story the story of my life -

They love the sorceress, Kagome thinks to herself, and they hate me. They think that I am the evil one, and because they are the ones who will tell the stories that is what the world will remember.

And he will suffer because I didn't see it in time.

Now her eyes are spilling over, her tears falling over her broken heart, and she cannot see, cannot hear, cannot think -

She feels Kikyou's arms close around her.

"Don't cry," Kikyou says, brokenly, crying a little herself, and Kagome doesn't know why, doesn't understand, even though she does. She presses her face to Kikyou's shoulder and shudders beneath the pain, sobs out all her sad and shattered hopes, and she thinks that, under all of this, that she might finally

comprehend all the things that Kikyou had known.

She herself had erased all that betrayal, all that hatred and sadness, and now it is Kikyou who holds her, strokes her hair, and Kagome cries, suspended between life and death, between the past she once wanted and the future she now craves, between inconsolable nostalgia and impossible love, and she waits for the moment in time when all will be decided, the moment when they will either win or lose -

* * *

- but, then again, what was winning, anyway?

Briefly, Sesshoumaru closed his eyes and saw flames.

He could kill all his enemies. No, he would kill all his enemies. He could send all his servants away. He would send all his servants away.

And he could burn the House of the Moon to the ground with his own hand, and then leave his father's lands and never return, because none of that feels like losing any longer.

Maybe it never had. Maybe his wounded pride had always just been salt on all the gaping wounds that would never fully heal.

And now there was another bloody, ragged wound, and it might be the one that would kill him, except this one -

He'd spent his whole life looking for power, and then he was powerless. His mother died of disease he could not fight; his father turned his back and would not listen. And his poor little girl had been taken out of his hands, and he could never close that wound, but right here, right now -

Kagome had wanted him to win, so he would.

He stepped forwards.

His feet seemed leaden, but still he walked. He was so tired, but so close, and

really, she had been nothing to him, nothing, but it had pleased him to be with her, had pleased him to want her, and now, it seemed, it pleased him to need her.

And Sesshoumaru always did what he pleased.

He came to a stop. Her body was at his feet.

And he hesitated.

The wind gusted again.

And then, dimly, Sesshoumaru registered a strange, stinging pain in the fleshy swell at the base of his palms.

It felt... familiar. Old.

For a long moment he didn't move, didn't want to move, didn't want to confirm what he already knew, but he had to, had to. Very slowly, he lifted his right hand, uncurled his fingers, and found something that he had not seen since he was just a boy.

Sesshoumaru stared.

In the grey light his claws were stained dark red.

And then he watched, the roar of his heart in his ears, as across his palm four bloody, ragged holes silently, seamlessly knit themselves back together.

* * *

And -

"What will you give him to hold on to?"

"A promise."

- there is the sudden sound of breath -

* * *

The world came back, and there was so much blood in her mouth that she nearly choked. Desperately she turned and coughed up a stream of already-clotting blood before gulping huge droughts of air. The knife that had killed her lay next to her hand.

The knife that killed her -

She had been dead, and now she was not, and from the muddy ground Kagome looked up, frantically, needing to see him -

He was a few feet away, Tenseiga clutched in his bloodstained hand, and the expression in his eyes was almost enough to kill her again.

He needed he wanted he longed for -

Time was short, so short, running out so quickly, and she forced herself to say the thing she had found between life and death.

Kagome looked him in the eye, and she struggled to put all her determination, all her fast devotion into her voice -

"I will find you," she said, and -

Well. That's all there was.

And years and years later, Kagome would still wonder: if she hadn't said that, would he still have been distracted at the crucial moment?

He only had a fraction of a second, but it was long enough for her to see his face melt, almost imperceptibly, from yearning to confusion, and then he learned what she meant.

Kagome saw the hilt of a knife bloom from his chest.

She could feel his youki revolt, unleashed, rearing up savagely as it fought the

spell. For a moment he swayed where he stood. Blinked once, slowly, his eyes strangely far away, and Kagome dared to hope that the sorceress - oh god, she could feel the sorceress behind her, could feel her weakened strength struggle - hoped that the sorceress wouldn't have enough power and the story wouldn't end the way she'd thought it would, because he was so strong, so very strong, just like his brother, just like his father -

- and both were dead -

- but oh, please, maybe -

She saw his hand twitch, slightly, as though to pluck the dagger from his body, and then -

- there was another, in his arm. It sparked with its sealing spell.

Sesshoumaru went down on one knee, and now she was on her feet, stumbling to him, could hear shouts behind her. His eyes were glazed over, his breathing labored, and she could still feel him struggling against his fate and -

- another, glowing white hot, in the soft hollow of his shoulder.

Sesshoumaru fell.

Slowly, slowly, like falling through the sea, Sesshoumaru's eyes slid closed and he felt himself hit the ground, paralyzed, sealed, imprisoned.

He heard her scream his name as she scrambled forward, felt her fingers barely brush the hilt of the blade in his chest as though to free him, and then she choked as though being gagged, her warm, living weight lifted from him, beyond the reach of the hands she sought to weave into his clothes. He heard her struggle as they dragged her from him, her frantically muffled voice rolling through the air, striving to reach what her body could not.

He thought he heard the clash of battle. He thought he heard the devouring flames. He thought heard his enemies raging, his lands in ruin, and all his pride destroyed.

But really, it didn't seem to matter much.

He thought he heard her crying.

* * *

Pain happened.

When Kagome regained consciousness her head ached so badly that she could feel each heavy beat of her heart throb inside her brain. She was slumped against something hard and unforgiving. Not every part of her body hurt, but the places that didn't just seemed to add insult to the places that did, and she just wanted to go to sleep again and forget -

Sesshoumaru.

Her eyes flew open.

She was inside a hut; there was little light, but what little there was still sent a stab of agony through her skull, and it took all her willpower to refrain from groaning. She couldn't open her right eye either, and it hurt to try.

Kagome winced at the ache of her eyelid, which pulled even more bruises on her face from a dull ache into a ripple of pain. She gasped.

There was a rustle, and someone laughed.

Kagome tried to stay very still, wishing that she hadn't given away her state of consciousness, but it probably didn't matter.

She could still feel everything. Bruises, abrasions, the burn of the ropes that bound her, and with her, very near, the power of the madoushi flaring in response to her own, and somewhere else - oh, god, so far away - she could still feel Sesshoumaru's youki spiking feebly.

In the pit of her stomach, Kagome felt something heavy and cold as stone settle down.

"Your youkai is quite pretty."

The stone-cold something shifted, grinding into her guts. Slowly, her neck screaming in protest, Kagome turned her head.

The madoushi sat near her, staring leisurely at the fire. She was lounging as though she didn't have a care in the world. Bloodstained bandages wrapped snugly around her left arm. As Kagome watched, the sorceress slid her gaze from the fire to her captive. She appeared to be waiting for an answer.

Kagome said nothing. Even if she had an answer, she would not have spoken.

After a moment the madoushi just shrugged and jerked her head towards the door.

"You can feel him, can't you?" she asked.

Kagome remained mute, but she felt the muscles in her face jerk involuntarily.

Yes, I can feel him, she thought, and for a moment the ache of longing overwhelmed all other pains.

The sorceress must have read her reaction in her face because she smiled, and for the second time Kagome had to marvel at how benign she seemed; she might have even appeared benevolent, if it weren't for the hard, unsmiling eyes that hid behind that beatific mask.

"Yes," the madoushi agreed, "I can feel him, too. He's quite powerful, you know."

Yes. I know.

"Almost couldn't get him to stop moving," the madoushi continued, studying her face. "I nearly passed out with three. Probably couldn’t have done a fourth."

She sighed a little. "He's still not sealed," she added. "You can feel him fighting it, so his mind is probably wide awake. But he is paralyzed, so I guess we'll just have to make a little shrine to keep him safe. And immobile, of course, just as a precaution in case the spells weaken enough for him to move."

For a moment, Kagome saw him, in the dark, oppressed by spells and prayers and holy energy and the powerful binding lodged in his body, seeping through his blood.

You're going to seal him in a shrine, Kagome thought, and he's going to have to wait, awake, for someone to free him. For years. Centuries, maybe.

Her stomach lurched.

Sluggishly she ran her sticky tongue over swollen lips, and tasted the blood that had dried on her chin.

"How many more are you going to kill?" she asked in a cool, cracked whisper.

The madoushi looked at her with vague surprise, as though she had forgotten that Kagome was capable of speech.

"Oh, no one at the moment," she said airily, recovering smoothly. "No point right now. I can't convert raw suffering into power all by myself. I'll have to find a new companion..."

The madoushi trailed off thoughtfully. "Besides," she continued, appearing to contemplate something of great import, "things are going well for me. I just saved a village from the menace that had given them the plague, after all. They were quite upset with you, as you can tell."

Kagome didn't answer. She swallowed dryly as the sorceress chuckled again.

"Good thing for you that I was there, eh?" she said. "Otherwise they probably would have beaten you to death."

Around the cold in her belly a small wisp of warm anger curled upwards. "Why didn't you just let them?" Kagome croaked. "Why didn't you seal him completely? It would be easy."

The madoushi sighed. "Yes, it would be quite easy, but I have a much, much better idea."

Kagome watched as the sorceress slid gracefully across the floor, and sat in front of her victim. Desperately, Kagome hoped that the girl would come just a little too close, maybe within reach of her aching limbs, but she stopped several feet away.

The madoushi looked at Kagome for a long moment, as though trying to think of how to tell her some very bad news. "You took a great deal away from me, and it will take me a long time to get it back," she finally said. She sounded as though she were speaking to a child. "So killing you would be too light of a punishment. After all, you've already been dead once today!"

She laughed just a little, as if she had made a cute joke.

"So I think," she continued sweetly, "that I will let you live. In your world."

There was a long moment while Kagome's brain tried to comprehend what the sorceress was saying.

"You mean the well?" she finally asked. "The world on the other side of the well?"

"Very good!" the madoushi said, clapping delightedly. "You are going back to your world, and he will stay in this one."

And Kagome almost blew it by saying that they were, in reality, the same world, but the madoushi continued, and for once she did not make a stupid, horrible mistake. Her tongue tripped and stuttered to a stop inside her mouth.

"I know you can't come back unless you have a mission, so... maybe someday you'll get back through. By that time, though, I'll be gone." The madoushi smiled. "You see?"

Slowly, Kagome blinked. "What?" she muttered after a moment. "That's worse than death?"

For the first time, there was a flash of anger in the sorceress' eyes. "Don't play stupid with me," she snapped. "Anyone can see the way you are. You should have seen his face when I killed you."

...longing, yearning, needing...

"And then you were so valiant when you tried to save him! It's the stuff of stories," the madoushi continued, her voice colored with a dark cynicism. "So we shall make this story just a little more tragic. Instead of killing you, I shall do my best to separate you forever. It will be so romantic."

Kagome tugged at her bonds, wanting nothing more than to injure the stupid, horrible girl who said such horrible things in that sweet little voice. But she'd had her chance to kill her, hadn't she? And she had failed.

Romantic, she thought bitterly. What a stupid, cruel romance. Fourth-rate melodrama, at best.

With a tiny, shuddering sigh, Kagome closed her eyes and refused to reply. There was a slight flutter on her cheeks, and after a moment she realized that she was crying the secret, silent tears that only come when there is nothing left to do but cry.

There were no more words, so she said nothing as the villagers lifted her up and carried her out of the hut. She made no noise as they passed into the well house, was silent as the men groped her, remained mute when the madoushi whispered to her about the shrine she would build for the youkai still sprawled in the muddy field outside of the village.

Kagome didn’t make a sound until they tossed her over the lip of the well and into the future, and then she screamed so loudly that her throat tore and bled as the ending rose up to claim her.

Tales from the House of the Moon
by
Resmiranda

Chapter Thirty-Five: Interlude

..o..

Vandalism at Local Shrine
Etsuko Hayashi
Staff Writer

(TOKYO) - The Meitoku Shrine in west Tokyo was broken into and vandalized on Thursday night.

Between the hours of 10 pm and 6 am, a person or persons broke into the shrine and tore up the floorboards in the main sanctuary. Local law enforcement officials said they have begun investigating the incident, suspecting it to be linked to other acts of vandalism around the city. The frequency and destructiveness of this small wave of vandalism has been on the rise since early June. The police said they are making progress in their ongoing investigation.

The Meitoku Shrine was built in 1598 to commemorate the deliverance of the village from a plague. Local legend maintains that a powerful miko fought and defeated the mononoke causing the sickness on that spot.

Of particular interest to investigators was what appeared to be a small chamber beneath the floor of the sanctuary, uncovered by the vandals. It is thought that nothing was taken from the shrine, but the existence of the chamber suggests otherwise. For now it is assumed there has been no burglary. The shrine priest, Kaito Nakamura, 68, was unaware of the chamber's existence prior to the incident.

"I am deeply dismayed that anyone would desecrate this sacred place," Nakamura said. "It is truly regrettable."

Tu me chuchotais un conte à l'oreille de neige / Et me disais je suis émue: Yeah, yeah, sorry this took for... EVER. Thank you so much to Technoelfie for guiding me through it - if she hadn't, it would have been pure shit - and to Cinnie for listening to me whine.

This chapter is dedicated to Archer362, because I am her closet fangirl and she rules at the art.

Tales from the House of the Moon
by
Resmiranda

Chapter Thirty-Six

"It's a shame I have to wait until the ending
everything I've yet to break is surely bending
every vow I ever take is just pretending
that this mess I make is worth defending."
- Barenaked Ladies, "Next Time"

* * *

At the edge of the shrine courtyard stands a majestic beech tree, large and imposing, its green, sunbaked branches reaching ever upwards into the starry night. It is a triumph of nature, of the glory of creation, however only the most acute observers will be able to discern that something is amiss in the darkness.

For there, cradled in the branches, is something odd. It is an indistinct shape, soft and dark, and perhaps only the faintest metallic gleam shines softly beneath the crescent moon. Something sinister.

A prowler.

But no ordinary prowler! This prowler is our intrepid heroine, Higurashi Kagome. Brave, bold, travel-weary, and thinking about herself in the third person. Clearly, it has not been a good day for Kagome.

Er, I mean, me.

A moment passed.

On her solid but somewhat knobbly perch, Kagome shifted with increasing discomfort and tried to quell what appeared to be her fatigue-induced schizophrenia.

Not a good day for me. Right, Kagome?

...please don't answer that, by the way.

Another moment passed and, to her relief, no one did. Sighing, Kagome reached up and pushed down against the painful, swollen skin around her right eye, a ritual she had adopted in order to keep herself awake. It was marginally more effective than making up her own voice-over, but less exciting. A hiss escaped her at the self-inflicted pain as it jerked her back into full consciousness.

Exacerbating her wounds probably wasn't the brightest of ideas, but the way Kagome figured it she had so many already that one or two more probably wouldn't matter. In all frankness, she was a mess. She wasn't even certain she was going to be able to get down out of this tree without re-injuring her ankle; she'd almost broken it jumping back into the well on the off-chance that it would play nice with her and take her to a time in which she could actually be useful for once. Of course, it hadn't worked, and the landing had sent a sharp lance of pain up her already sore legs. Even the hot shower hadn't helped much.

Neither had climbing through Souta's window in the first place. Her brother hadn't even heard her frantic pebbles against his window, so she had to break into her childhood home without his help. Theoretically she could have just gone in through the door, but that was out of the question seeing as how she had promised her mother that she wouldn't go back to the well and all. Though, in retrospect, Kagome was forced to grudgingly admit that her mother's concerns might not have been totally unfounded.

Souta had almost blown it for her anyway. Apparently waking up to one's bruised, bloodstained, and near-hysterical sister induced screaming, and only after much frantic shushing and hissed explanations did Souta finally seem to get what was happening.

He'd been mad, but had still helped her, telling her she owed him one; while

she took a quick shower he had rooted around his room and eventually unearthed some of his old clothes that had last seen daylight in the late nineties. Which was fine, since walking through Tokyo in a bloodstained priestess outfit was probably not the best way to travel incognito. Then it had only been a quick raid through her grandfather's things before she found a book on the shrines of Tokyo and had hightailed it home, only to find the shrine she was looking for ten pages in.

Maybe the universe is being nice to me.

Kagome paused to let that sink in.

Haha, she decided. Wow, do I need sleep or what?

At least her temporary insanity seemed to be subsiding; cuddling her crowbar closer she glanced at the moon and silently urged it to go faster. A low pressure in her belly was beginning to make itself felt, and even though Kagome was highly aware of the fact that she was not unused to relieving herself at the foot of trees, it still didn't seem right to do so when there was a perfectly good toilet not three hundred meters from where she sat. Amusingly enough, Kagome knew of the location of this toilet because it was in her apartment.

It was funny, really, how close the shrine in which Sesshoumaru may or may not be imprisoned was to where she had been living for the past year.

Haha, yes. Terribly amusing, in the same way that a basket of strangled puppies was cute.

With a scowl, Kagome tightened her grip on the crowbar. Hilarious! she thought bitterly for the fourteenth time that night. Good one, Universe! You totally got me this time.

For the briefest of moments Kagome wished the thick metal in her hand was actually a machine gun of some sort. Blasting a few bushes into oblivion and possibly even teaching a wall a good lesson it wouldn't soon forget seemed incredibly cathartic, and such an action would probably take her mind off of her possibly-impending death, as well. In fact, if she had an uzi, it might even delay her death!

For maybe all of two seconds.

Arg.

Swallowing hard around the sudden beating of her heart in her throat, Kagome nervously peered through the leaves that surrounded her, taking in the moonlit shrine in front of her.

This was it. The most likely spot. If he was in there...

Oh, man.

He is going to fucking kill me.

Well. That'd be twice in one day, then.

In the pit of her belly, there was a hollow empty trembling, and with something akin to panic Kagome shoved it away. She was certainly not in the right frame of mind to think about what had happened in the space between life and death; she needed to focus on the here and now. Here and now was the only place and time worth thinking about, after all.

If only she weren't so uncertain about the here and now, too! Had been uncertain ever since she landed gently at the bottom of the well, the scream in her throat still raw and grating, and then she had looked upwards, filled with pain inside and out, hoping and wanting -

- and finding nothing. Just the light of the courtyard spilling in through the doors and creeping into the depths of the well. She had wanted - half-expected, even - to see Sesshoumaru standing there, looking down at her with exasperation or anger or something, but he hadn't.

Which left her in a bit of a predicament as to her course of action. Miserably, Kagome shifted in the tree again, feeling it poke and prod every bruised and tender place on her body; probably adding a few more bruises to the collection, too.

Stupid tree, she thought. Unless you have a doctorate in quantum thingies, we

can do quite well without your input.

Huffing with annoyance, Kagome struggled to put her scattered thoughts in some kind of order, because even though she was perched in a tree waiting for the opportune moment to make her criminal debut, Kagome was still not at all certain she was doing the right thing. Since she had not yet made any irreversible moves, she could still start over from first principles and go from there, just in case there was something she had been overlooking.

So. He hadn't been waiting for her, which meant one of three things: he had escaped and now, after four hundred years, he had forgotten her, or had not known when she would be coming back, or something similar; he hadn't escaped and was even now waiting for her to come and free him; or there was another story that would take her back to him.

She supposed that it was also hypothetically possible that he might be dead, but Kagome dismissed this as ridiculous; Sesshoumaru wouldn't do something so banal as die.

Nope. Not without killing me first, she added.

With difficulty, she swallowed around the dread that had knotted in her throat. No matter what happened when she found him, he was going to be furious. Or completely insane. She could only imagine his state of mind after god knew how many years sealed up and conscious. Maybe he would be so crazy that he wouldn't even recognize her when they finally met again.

If they finally met again.

When you come back.

This was, of course, where it all started to break down. Finding the shrine in which Sesshoumaru was imprisoned seemed like a good move, but if she understood quantum uncertainty and the nature of causality correctly, which she probably didn't, then doing something definite kind of... solidified the past. Or the present. Or something. So if she found him here and now, then there was no way for her to go back and possibly free him at an earlier point, because it was the past that dictated the present... or was it that the past didn't change the present because it had already happened, so if she found him in

the shrine now it would prevent her from finding him in the past because obviously she hadn't... no, it didn't matter because...?

Damn damn damn damn damn!

Ooooh, she hated this sort of thing even at the best of times! Of course now that she was so tired she couldn't even see straight, now was the time when all that theoretical stuff became not-so-theoretical and actually mattered. On the other hand it probably didn't make any difference; no matter how many knots she tied her brain into, there was still absolutely no way for her to discern the correct course of action. It was all too connected, too endlessly self-referential.

Ugh. Maybe she should have tried finding a new fairytale, but she would only find a new one if he weren't in the shrine, so it was possible that she could spend her entire life looking for the next fairytale to take her back to him when one might not exist. Maybe she should have waited a little longer for him to find her.

...and it's been four hundred years... maybe he would be better off sealed...

Violently, she shook her head, trying to dispel her own traitorous thoughts. Doesn't matter. Screw it, Kagome thought ferociously. I've found the shrine. If he's there, he's there, and if he's not, I'll look for him. There'll be another fairytale, or he escaped and is alive, and when I find him -

...when I find him...

Well. Everything seemed to go kind of fuzzy after that bit. Almost as if someone had just cut off her head.

And frankly, that just didn't seem fair.

God! Stupid Sesshoumaru! Stupid, stupid Sesshoumaru, who thought he was so goddamn invincible that he just... ugh, that he just stood there and brought her back to life. He didn't even pick her up and take her somewhere else, because obviously he could never be in any danger. If only he'd snatched that first knife out of the air, or dodged it, or something, but no! It didn't even warrant his attention and... and... arg!

Dammit. If he didn't kill her first, there was a good chance she just might strangle him instead.

A sudden well of nausea in her belly caused her to wince and press her hand to her stomach, temporal problems momentarily forgotten in favor of her physical ailments. It passed after a moment.

Swallowing hard, Kagome closed her eyes.

Okay, He's either there, or he's not. If he isn't, he's somewhere else. If he is, he most likely exists in one of two states: completely bonkers or fucking furious. Schrödinger's Sesshoumaru. I just... don't know.

She took a deep, shuddering breath.

Time to find out, then.

Leaning back Kagome stuffed the crowbar into her belt with icy fingers before wiggling down onto her stomach and gripping the branch tightly.

Slowly, slowly, she lowered herself to the next branch down, her ankle protesting as she let it take her weight. The branch gave and wavered.

Kagome froze, heart in her throat, certain that she was going to fall and break a leg right at the finish line.

That didn't happen, though. After a tense moment she edged towards the trunk and repeated the process, trying to make as little sound as possible as she descended, not that there was anyone around to hear her. She hoped.

After a minute or so she finally dropped to the ground, landing in a crouch. Pain from her injured ankle lanced brightly up her leg, nearly sending her to her knees.

"Ah - !" she gasped, barely repressing a cry of pain. Determined to ignore it, Kagome skittered with a distinct limp towards the side wall. The moon was bright tonight, but there was a long line of trees lining the side of the courtyard, providing much needed cover. Heart pounding, Kagome moved forward and attempted to slink as nonchalantly as possible through the

shadows.

Her heart fluttered in her throat as she dragged her shoulder against the wall, staying away from the light. Beneath her feet she felt the grit of the stones through the soles of her shoes as she strove to make as little noise as possible.

It took forever to reach the main building, and Kagome paused, crouching in the shadows, trying to calm her breath. This was going to be the part where she would be most exposed to the light, most likely to make a lot of noise, so she had to do it as quickly as possible.

Just... look like you're supposed to be doing this, she told herself, though even in her head her voice was shrill and nervous. Lifting a hand she wiped sweat from her brow, shivering; she was wearing gloves and long sleeves and the summer night was warm, but each breath she took chilled her more and more.

She felt her shoulders hunch, as though she were trying to withdraw into herself.

He might hate her. He might prefer to stay sealed than to live in a world full of humans. He might be insane, lost to centuries of nothingness, might not even know her name any more. He might not even be there, might have escaped, might not have cared to even look for her return.

He might kill her. She might die.

And if she did, would she wait for him, there on the banks of the river?

Would he want her to?

In her ears, Kagome heard the thundering of her heart.

But I promised him, she thought.

I promised.

For one last, long moment, she stayed there, formless.

And then: Okay.

Kagome stood immediately, almost popping out of her crouch, and began to stride with purpose out of the shadows, across the small courtyard. Her breath came fast and quick, her teeth clenching against the trembling.

It took forever and no time at all, strolling through the silver light, hoping that she would not hear a shout over the roar of blood in her ears -

- and then she was softly mounting the steps of the main building, passing the bell and the empty offering box, reaching out towards the closed doors and praying that they would be unlocked.

They were, and she gave a tiny prayer of thanks that she wouldn't have to use the crowbar for this at least. Clumsily, her gloved fingers fumbling, she opened the doors, wincing at the slight noise they made, and slipped inside.

Her hands were shaking so badly that she was almost unable to shut them behind her.

She didn't like being in here. She lived in a shrine, but she wasn't a shrine maiden, a real one, and it was just like trespassing to cross the threshold. She didn't belong here, wasn't supposed to be here -

Breathing hard, Kagome let her forehead fall lightly against the door, trying to calm herself, and deep in her stomach she could feel her fear and anxiety, her guilt and regret, roll over and over, crashing into one another.

Down the backs of her legs she could feel a slender line of fearful electricity; it tickled her muscles, urging them to jerk and run, and she couldn't stop her shaking hands.

Stop this, she commanded herself. Just stop. If this is where they put him, then there is nothing holy here, and no reason to be uncomfortable. If this is where they put him, then this is a prison, not a shrine.

Somewhere behind her was the altar, and beyond this room was the next where the shintai - the home of the kami that lived here - was held.

Okay. If he's here, he'll be in the next building.

Kagome took a step backwards, began to turn around and -

- a jolt shot through her, from her toes to the top of her head, forcing her to her knees.

She gasped, tensed, terror bolting through her, and she wanted to run, run, run -

- but -

Oh -

Her eyes flew open as she felt her jaw drop, but she couldn't make a sound.

Struggling for air, Kagome stared at her hands against the wood of the floor as beneath her fingers thrummed a spell so powerful that it shook her heart.

She was a jumble, her thoughts in disarray. This is... this could be...

Desperately she squeezed her eyes shut and concentrated, felt the texture and weight of the magic, tasted the colors it sang, and she knew.

A binding spell.

Here, this is where he is, he is here, they put him under the floor, this is where he is -

It had been so silly to assume that the sealing daggers were all that the sorceress would leave to hold him, of course she would put other wards in place, and this was why she couldn't have felt him even if she had known.

Kagome felt the years weigh heavy and dark above her head.

But he could still have escaped, she thought desperately. He could have been freed. He might not be here, oh, please don't let him be here.

Everything seemed as though she were in a dream, moving weirdly, and she was tired, so tired that the world stuck out at odd angles against the humming

magic and roiling fear. Through the translucent windows the moon shone blue and dim, but it was just enough to see by. Tracing trembling fingers over the seams of the wood, Kagome let her hand draw the crowbar from her belt, her stomach lurching at the thought of ripping up the floor, at the thought of what she might find, what she might not find, what was real and what wasn't.

Grinding her teeth together, Kagome moved further into the shrine, moved down the spell and turned, trying to figure out where to start before she chose the end closest to the door. Carefully she traced the borders of the magic.

He might be here, she thought. Might have been here all along.

God, no.

Her power swelled in her chest, down through her arm to her fingers, igniting down the length of metal she held in her hand, and with a feral grunt she jammed the glowing end of the crowbar between two seams of wood and yanked -

Where the bar touched the spell dissolved with a strange steamy hiss, and the sound of splinters cracked through the silence of the room.

For a moment Kagome froze, straining to hear any movement, any sign that someone had heard her, but she could detect nothing.

So she did it again, and then again, and then again and again and again, ripping up the beautiful polished floor in ragged strips, and there were strange tears of effort and rage trembling at the corners of her eyes, but they didn't fall.

I'm coming, she thought, distant, disjointed. Please don't be there, please, I promise to be good, please, please be free, I'm coming, I promise...

Again and again she tore at the prison that held him, widening the dark hole between here and there, now and then, until she had destroyed nearly half of the enchanted section of floor as her power ate up the rest of the ancient spell. Only then did she let her quivering muscles finally halt in their wild frenzy.

Gasping she set the crowbar down and listened again for footsteps or distant shouts, but there was nothing.

Nothing came from underneath as well.

Kagome felt ill.

Her heart pounded all over her body, fear and longing and a desperate denial beating against the cage of her skin as she leaned over the black hole she had made.

Breathing hard, she yanked one glove from her trembling hand. She was soaking with cold sweat, wanted, needed to see, but she didn't dare turn on the flashlight. Air scraped down her throat, scratched her lungs, clawed at her from the inside out, and gingerly Kagome reached down into the darkness, clenching her teeth to fight the trembling of her stomach.

All around her she felt the dead quiet pour in.

Her freezing fingertips itched as she lowered her hand, praying that she wouldn't find anything, praying that she would, she didn't even know any more.

Please let him have escaped, she begged, the plea blotting out all other thoughts. Please let me find him, please let him be free, please let me touch him, please, please, please...

Just please.

And there was cloth. Heavy silk.

Something firm but cool beneath it.

Oh, please no.

She didn't want to, but had to, her mind was just burning blue static, fear and disbelief crowding in, and Kagome slid her hand up the seams of the kimono she had found. It sloped gently down, a shoulder, over and up, and then there was silken skin against her own. Cool to the touch.

Sesshoumaru.

Kagome felt the world open beneath her, yawning wide, and she hung, suspended, bloodless and cold.

He can't be dead, she thought. He can't be dead. He just can't. He would have rotted, wouldn't he? Was Inuyasha cold? Did he breathe? I can't remember! Horrifying images flashed through her head, of Sesshoumaru dying of thirst, starving for lack of food, there beneath the shrine floor, and dimly Kagome registered the sound of a high keening whine, full of air and anguish, in the back of her own throat.

She moved her hand down, over his still, cool chest, found the hilt of a knife.

Her fingers closed around it.

Beneath her fingers, she felt the spell, old but intact, spark against her hand, and suddenly Kagome flared, burning rage in her heart spreading up, up through her throat, into her brain.

It should not be this way. I won't let it be like this.

A rush of electricity jolted down her arm.

The spell vanished beneath her fingers, and without stopping to think she yanked the dagger out, tossed it to the side, barely heard it clatter against the floor.

She waited.

There was nothing -

And then she felt it, felt his youki well up from beneath the floorboards and filling the room with the silent wild wind of his power. Not dead. Still alive.

For a second she knew nothing but a relief so powerful that her limbs buckled, and she was slumped on the floor, her hand still anchored in the darkness, her fingers fastened in his kimono.

- thank you, thank you, I'll be good, so good, thank you, please, thank you, good

thank you -

She waited for him to sit up, to say something, to embrace her or kill her or do anything at all.

She kept waiting.

He didn't move. Kagome licked her dry lips and tried to grab enough air to speak.

"Sesshoumaru?" she whispered urgently.

No answer.

For a moment she was just as immovable as he, and then she was running her hands frantically over him, down beneath the wood, down his side to his arm, another knife, another angry surge of power. The spell cracked and broke, the knife sliding easily from his flesh, and there was another swell of youki - she felt it, as of thunder rattling in her bones - but still he didn't move.

Panic trembled under her skin, urging her to scream or to run or to do something, but she crushed it ruthlessly, her anxious fingers tracing up, up, to the knife in his shoulder, and the second she brushed over the hilt Kagome felt all of her rage and tear, breaking the spell and the knife came away in her hand.

Now he was free, was liberated, and she felt his presence fill the room like a stormy night beneath the shrouded moon.

He was still as stone. She snatched her hand away, not wanting to feel his impassive body.

Wake up, she screamed, in the silence of her head. Get up, god dammit. Fuck you, get up, wake up, wake up, strangle me, slice me to pieces, kill me if you want, but just fucking wake UP -

Desperately she swallowed around a throat full of tears, and tried one last time.

She drew a shaky breath.

"Sesshoumaru?" she whispered.

The soft sound of her voice drifted down, slipping into the darkness below.

For an eternal falling moment, there was no answer. The space under the floor, black and impenetrable, was silent, and for that moment Kagome forgot how to exist.

And -

Then there was a rustling from beneath, as of silk on silk, and then a voice.

"Kagome," Sesshoumaru said.

Her heart stumbled in her chest.

It was... no, this couldn't be right. There was no anger, no rage or insanity, nothing, he sounded exactly the same, exactly, as though no time at all had passed, and for a moment she thought she was dreaming this, that it couldn't be this way, that the fates would never let him be all right because that would be something good, and good things didn't happen, and it was never that easy, never never never -

And then he broke through her breathlessness, through her aching hopes and desperate denial, and said, very quietly:

"What are you doing here?"

What - ?

From far, far away, Kagome felt her mouth drop open.

Oh, she thought.

Oh, my god.

A damp, choked laugh, desperate and high in her throat, escaped from her. It

didn't even sound like her voice. She was so far away, lost in this unreal dream that still felt real, but couldn't be but please oh please yes please -

And then she asked, "Have you - have you been planning to say that for four hundred years?"

God, that was not what she wanted to say, but she just could not open her mouth and pour out the thousand little words that she wanted to tell him. Kagome quaked at her cowardice, trembled with her need, and waited for him to tell her all the things she wanted to hear.

A quiet moment slipped between them. Then she heard him snort, familiar and sharp. It tweaked her heart.

And then, "More or less."

She couldn't think. She hurt so much she couldn't feel her brain.

The world condensed down to her, and to him, and all things that flowed between them.

Kagome placed a hand over her mouth, struggling to swallow the sadness and pain, to keep it inside where it would never find him again. She felt it clawing up the back of her throat. She felt herself begin to crumble.

For forever, she was still.

And after forever, she slowly, slowly lowered her hand, and whispered:

"I am so, so sorry."

Then she was crying so hard she couldn't make a sound, and then he reached across the years, through all the words and thoughts and moments that bound them together and kept them apart as if they weren't even there at all, and placed his fingers against her cheek, brushing away the tears.

"Do not cry," she heard him say.

And there in the incandescent darkness Kagome turned her face to his touch,

branded a trembling kiss against his palm. Wept, could not speak.

Au bord du monde encore une fois: In the real world, shrines get torn down and rebuilt every few decades or so. In the RES-O-VERSE, this does not happen, because when I plotted this particular part out two years ago, I was too lazy to do my homework. Whoops.

And before anyone asks, NO, this is NOT THE END. There's still a little more to go, which will be posted in one final update ASAP.

As always, thanks to Technoelfie. You should all thank her, too, because this chapter would have sucked without her emergency intervention. Seriously.

And this chapter is dedicated to my beloved Jojo-kun, because not only was she the first to correctly guess what's going to happen in this chapter, but she also draws pretties and made me into the degenerate Inucest-shipper I am today. DAMN YOU! DAMN YOU, I SAY!

Tales from the House of the Moon
by
Resmiranda

Chapter Thirty-Seven

"Woman, strip me of my clothes and my doubts. Undress me, undoubt me."
- Eduardo Galleano, The Book of Embraces

* * *

In the end, Sesshoumaru decided, it wasn't so bad, after all.

Except for the bells. And the clapping.

Damn, but he was sick of clapping. And bells. If he never heard another bell as

long as he lived, it would be too late because the damage was already done. Oh, he loathed bells, and he vowed, when he was free, to melt the bell of the shrine, first thing. It was a good goal in that it was achievable and uncomplicated, unlike every other goal or problem that would present itself once he was free. But still, it wasn't so bad, after all.

Of course, it took quite a while to reach this conclusion. Five seconds after he hit the ground, Sesshoumaru was feeling very un-Zen about the entire situation, and decided that it simply couldn't be happening to him. He was not nearly so careless as to allow himself to be sealed.

Six seconds after he hit the ground, the first villager hit Kagome, and Sesshoumaru realized that this was hell.

The priestess must have felt his power straining her spells almost to the breaking point - though not quite, to his further fury - because no more than half a minute passed before she put a stop to the beating. He could hear her hatefully cajoling voice calling for compassion, ordering them to bind the girl and carry her back to the shrine. Unfortunately from Sesshoumaru's perspective this was not much of an improvement, since as far as he was concerned that just meant she was being abused out of ear-shot.

He raged, youki clawing at the bindings, body struggling to revert to its true state. He was certain that, given a few more hours, he would have succeeded in breaking the spells just enough to escape, but it was not to be.

His bonds had only weakened slightly when a group of disgusting, smelly villagers swept down upon him and lifted him up - the feel of their hands made him want to cut them off, or at the very least retch - and carried him a short distance to running water. There they divested him of his armor and his swords, which only pissed him off more, and then washed the mud away; later he supposed he should be grateful for that, but at the time being cleansed by a mob of dirty humans was simply too repulsive to endure.

Then the villagers laid him down and began to build the shrine around him.

The next morning, the stupid bitch that Kagome should have killed returned to his side and, in the first of many rituals, began to construct his prison of binding spells.

Fifty-four thousand one hundred and forty seconds after he hit the ground, Sesshoumaru decided that he was distinctly unamused.

If there was anything about the situation that wasn't miserably unjust and infuriating, Sesshoumaru decided that it was his continued consciousness and acuteness of sense, because at the very least he was able to find out what had happened to Kagome. As the days ground onward and the building rose around him, he heard some variation on this conversation more times than he could count:

Shina-sama is so wise and good, so virtuous that she let that sorceress live! I would not have merely banished her if it were up to me, Village Idiot Number One would say. Village Idiot Number One could be anyone, of course; it didn't really matter which villager was actually speaking since they were all idiots.

Oh, yes, Village Idiot Number Two would agree, she is merciful as well as powerful! We are lucky to have her.

Those first few years, Sesshoumaru derived a fair amount of idle amusement from imagining himself in the role of Great and Powerful Demon Lord Speaking to Village Idiot Number One.

Shina-sama is a merciful woman, he imagined Village Idiot Number One saying.

No, he would reply genially, right before brutally disemboweling Village Idiot Number One, Village Idiot Number One's family, his friends, their friends, and anyone else who looked at him in a manner he didn't like, which was essentially anyone who looked at him. Anyone who didn't look at him, too.

Sesshoumaru found this exercise quite cathartic.

Not nearly as cathartic as, perhaps, actually living it out would have been but he had to take what he could get, because one billion one hundred seven million eight hundred seventy thousand eight hundred and eight seconds after he hit the ground it finally dawned on him that he was going to be stuck in there for a long, long time.

He'd held out hope for a while, though. The first few weeks he had bided his time, impatiently waiting for Kagome to stop dragging her feet and come back, but after a few cycles of the moon Sesshoumaru was forced to reluctantly acknowledge that his home and lands had probably been overrun by now. Strangely, he found himself only vaguely concerned about the fate of either his holdings or his employees and acquaintances; there was no doubt in his mind that Myouga had escaped - the flea always did - but as for the rest of them he couldn't muster the energy to care. They'd never really done anything for him, and so he found their loss peculiarly without pain.

Almost idly he hoped they'd burned the House of the Moon. It would have been good to do it himself, but the end result was the same, so it probably didn't matter. Really, the gesture would have been just a formality, since he had already shuffled off the dead shell of that life; destroying the physical remnants of it would have merely been a simple acknowledgment that there was no home, no tattered family honor to repair, nothing to hold him any longer.

The Sesshoumaru who had cared about those things was gone, burned away, and he was what was left.

Time and time again, Sesshoumaru wondered, almost sadly, if this strange liberation was what his own father had sought in the arms of a human woman - liberation from duty and obligation, liberation from the suffering of his beloved, dying wife, liberation from all the small, sad reminders of the fading life he had cherished so much. Liberation from all that he used to be, but was no longer.

But his father was dead, and there was no way to know any more.

Time crawled on.

Thirty-one million eight hundred and four thousand six hundred and fifty seconds after he hit the ground, Sesshoumaru decided that he hated Kagome. Hate took up a lot of time and would keep him occupied, and besides, it was her fault he was in this predicament in the first place.

This might have kept him going for decades, but after about twenty years Sesshoumaru gave up; he had tried, but he just couldn't lay the blame at her

feet. That he was here was not her fault. The truth was that the fault was his.

His decision to follow her, his decision to keep her safe, his decision to turn back and fight with her, his decision to bring her back from the dead - all of those had been his decisions. She had not forced him at all, and, unlike practically everybody else, Kagome had never asked him for his help. That was the most important thing to remember - this was what he had chosen. Whatever the outcome was, it was his and no one else's.

So he decided that he hated himself, instead. This time he didn't even have to try.

For almost two centuries Sesshoumaru could not stop replaying those final moments before the first knife hit, wondering if he could have done anything differently, could not stop his anger at this weakness. One moment of inattention was all it had taken, and now he was here, trapped, waiting for Kagome to return to him.

There wasn't a day in which he did not imagine his release, did not list towards her return in his mind, did not long for her to sweep back into his life, dragging his freedom behind her.

There wasn't a day in which he did not remember her.

He missed her.

Time crawled on.

Determined to be just as strong - or, preferably, even stronger - when he was free, every day Sesshoumaru executed his combat training, over and over again in his mind, remembering what each movement, each slice felt like, so that when he finally escaped he would not have lost his edge.

He longed for physical movement; it would have made things so much easier, though, of course, would have negated the need for mental training in the first place. Regardless, it took a great deal of imagination and more than a little concentration to carry out this routine, and Sesshoumaru had never had an excess of either, but after a few years he managed to recreate his training in the darkness of his head.

The only problem with this approach was that concentrating on the physical sensations of combat had the unforseen side-effect of bringing to mind other physical sensations that he hoped to experience upon his release. Not that thinking of these things was bad, per se, but as the years went by his mind would stray more and more often to different movements, different textures against his fingers - and other parts of him - and all in all it was terribly distracting. And frustrating. Very, very frustrating.

So frustrating that, four billion eight hundred twenty five million seventy five thousand and six seconds after he hit the ground, Sesshoumaru decided he had endured enough.

He resolved to concentrate on the control of his youki. He didn't have much of a need for practice since he had always been exceptionally good at it, but it did have two huge advantages. One - he didn't even have to think about moving to do it, and two - there was a slim chance that it would help him escape.

There were a few false starts. This sort of ki training took a great deal of concentration; it was difficult to extend it beyond the binding spells without giving himself a headache, and at first the only beings he could pinpoint as targets to reach for were the priests of the shrine, whose holy auras were weak but still palpable from inside the binding spell.

Unfortunately when he did succeed, his priestly prey did not take kindly to the sudden demonic aura brushing over them, and would immediately swing into action, purifying the shrine, saying the prayers passed down from the sorceress that would strengthen the binding spells, and generally making a nuisance of themselves.

After this happened a couple of times, Sesshoumaru decided that strengthening his bonds was probably contrary to his goals, and settled for aiming for worshippers, whom he couldn't feel at all from inside the barrier, but who always kindly announced their presence with the clank of coins. The desired result was, of course, to strengthen himself enough to put a crack in the spells that held him immobile, and it would have been a brilliant plan if the priests weren't so scrupulous in their observance of the yearly rituals. Still, it felt like progress, and after a while that was enough for him.

Time crawled on.

Five billion three hundred and sixty-one million one hundred twenty thousand nine hundred and ninety-eight seconds after he hit the ground, right in the middle of a particularly uneventful stretch of history, Sesshoumaru decided to go crazy.

It seemed a very sensible thing to do at the time; as far as he knew, crazy people were very good at entertaining themselves in ways that did not involve tedious training, being a nuisance to pilgrims, or obsessive preoccupation with running a tongue down the long, taut line of muscle on the back of Kagome's thigh. So he decided to try it out, just to see if it was preferable to his usual sane but frustrating diversions.

Unfortunately, after only six months he quit in disgust; apparently being insane was not nearly as interesting as he had been led to believe and hadn't eased his frustration at all, so, rather disappointed, he ended the brief, flirtatious experiment and went back to being sane once more.

Insanity, it seemed, just wasn't for him. He wasn't even certain that he had been doing it right, anyway.

Time crawled on.

Seven billion one hundred ninety million two hundred and eleven thousand thirty four seconds after he hit the ground Sesshoumaru decided that it was tolerable, as long as he could keep himself occupied.

He found himself quite interested in the occasional smells. He could only discern them very faintly, and they had to be very strong, but there was always a story in each of them.

Other times he listened to the sounds of the villagers. His hearing was still incredibly acute, even from under the floor, and he was able to get a haphazard view of current events from gossipy conversations, like the progress of wars, famine, or pestilence, the general political climate, and who was sleeping with who's husband. To his surprise he found these conversations only moderately tedious. At the very least they passed the time.

And there was sleep. There was always sleep. Sesshoumaru enjoyed sleeping quite a bit - all his life he'd never been able to get enough of it, but now, with nothing to do and no way to do things even if there were, he found that he had a lot of time for sleep. He could sleep for days on end.

And sometimes, when he slept, Sesshoumaru dreamed. Sometimes he dreamed of his family, all of whom were long dead now.

Sometimes he dreamed of Rin, who had been so bright and brief. It had been so long, and still he looked to find her, sweet and untouchable, his own strange devotion filling the void where she had been.

Sometimes he dreamed of Kagome, and promises.

Time crawled on.

Finally, seven billion nine hundred sixteen million five hundred thirty-seven thousand eight hundred and twelve seconds after he hit the ground, Sesshoumaru decided that it wasn't so bad, after all.

True, he itched to move, but if he had not ended up here in this stupid shrine, he would have ended up doing - what? He hadn't really had a plan after the initial defiance of burning the House of the Moon and leaving his father's lands. Perhaps he would have crossed the sea, but most likely the only difference would have been that he would have killed his opponents in a different landscape, and possibly fallen ill from suspicious foreign foods.

Not to mention one very troubling thing he finally noticed, one day long, long after he had been sealed, which was that there seemed to be no more youkai.

Though he doubted very much that other youkai could feel him in his prison, he could still feel their pressure against the walls. Now, however, it had been years since a demonic aura brushed against the shrine; so many years that he couldn't even remember the last time it had happened. He could only assume the decline had not been sudden, merely his notice of it, as though one day they had finally slipped into obscurity and vanished. It seemed there were no more, or at least no more who dared to come close to a human settlement; something had apparently happened to them all, and Sesshoumaru wasn't certain how to process this observation.

Not that he wouldn't have been able to survive whatever it was that had laid all those lesser youkai low, but if there had been a sickness, or a mass extermination, or just a brutal war that had killed them all, or driven them underground, then it just might be possible that his little prison was, in fact, a fortress that had guaranteed his survival. True, he couldn't get out, but on the upside no one else could get in.

After pondering this idea for quite some time, Sesshoumaru decided that he liked this new perspective, and cheered himself further with thoughts of how fun it would be when he was once again unleashed on a world that had forgotten him.

Fortune was, apparently, all in how he looked at it.

Time crawled on.

To Sesshoumaru's gratified surprise, after about two and a half, maybe three centuries went by the world started to get really, really interesting. There was political upheaval and revolutions and lots and lots of war, and since at some point the little village Kagome had called Edo had become the most important city in Japan, Sesshoumaru felt right in the middle of it. There were ever more people talking about things that he could only vaguely imagine, like new weapons and mundane magic. Often he would think back on the things he and Kagome had talked of - or rather, the things she had said and that he had listened to - and would try to draw lines between where the world was now, and where it would be when she finally came to him.

At one point there was a particularly large and destructive war - humans had apparently advanced quite a bit since he had been sealed away - and then the war was lost and there were a lot of strange-spoken foreigners in the city for a while. And then it seemed as though the country threw open its doors and invited the outside world in.

Though Sesshoumaru could not inhale deeply at will and therefore could not utilize his sense of smell to the fullest, he still managed to pick up the change in scents that came sweeping in. They weren't very good smells, but they heralded a great deal of interesting noises as well. For years Sesshoumaru listened to the rumble of automobiles, to the steady pounding of construction,

and entertained himself with trying to imagine what everything looked like. He wondered what sort of house Kagome lived in, and if he had heard the sounds of its birth.

And then, twelve billion six hundred and forty-five million nine hundred and fifty-eight thousand two hundred and forty-nine seconds after he hit the ground, he felt her.

It took his breath away.

It was only for a second, and then the sensation of her was gone, sending him into a frenzy and then leaving behind only the tantalizing memory to keep him awake for many nights on end. Anxiously, he waited for it to come again, but it didn't. After a few years he concluded with deep annoyance that he had imagined it; clearly his desire for her was causing him to hallucinate.

Except then, a few years after that, he felt her again, and this time she was definitely nearby. Every part of him ached to reach out and touch her through his bonds, but he hesitated, suddenly uncertain as to what he should do. Was she looking for him? Had they even met in the past yet? Would contacting her screw things up?

So he kept his youki to himself, though it was hard. Only two weeks after the second time, she seemed to come near and simply stay there, and he had to assume that she had taken up residence nearby. Either that, or she was a heartless bitch who liked to torture him, which, though that was probably not the case, was what it felt like.

Every time she disappeared for longer than a week, Sesshoumaru became nearly frantic with hope and sudden anxiety. She had been with him for over a month during their last time together, so it stood to reason that if she was gone for more than four weeks on end then his time here was almost done.

Waiting was absolute agony.

Each time her absence stretched out, Sesshoumaru forced himself to stay awake, to wait for her to come back, cursing when she returned too quickly, and it was like that every time, until the day she left and he waited for over four weeks, growing delirious with exhaustion before his mind shut down in a

coma-like stupor.

Which was how he managed to sleep right through the majority of Kagome's frantic rescue mission, up until the moment Kagome ripped the first knife from his chest, and even then he was convinced, absolutely convinced that he was hallucinating or dreaming, that she couldn't be real.

This delusion lasted for a grand total of ten seconds before he felt her hands on his body. Then he was positive it was a dream, right up until the moment she ripped the second knife out, which hurt far more than he would have expected and he finally realized what was happening.

Sesshoumaru waited in absolute stillness, certain that she would disappear if he made a wrong move, while she ran her hands up his chest.

Twelve billion eight hundred sixty-six million seven hundred forty two thousand nine hundred thirty-four seconds after Sesshoumaru hit the ground, Kagome tore the final dagger from his shoulder.

Then, for the first time in over four hundred years, he opened his eyes, and the very first thing he saw was her bruised and battered face, shadowed blue, coarse and twisted with foolish, agonized longing.

No, he thought.

Not so bad, after all.

* * *

After a few moments Kagome realized that she was going to pass out from lack of oxygen if she didn't calm down. Since keeling over and dripping snot all over Sesshoumaru's remarkably well-preserved kimono did not seem to be the most gracious way to greet someone who had ostensibly been waiting four hundred years to see her, she hastily backed away, covered her face with her arm and struggled to stifle her sobs.

It took only a minute, but it felt like forever before the tears subsided. When she was finally down to only shuddering breaths and the occasional hiccup,

she lowered her arm and dabbed gingerly at her face, wincing when she touched a bruise.

There was a rustling as Sesshoumaru sat up; at the edge of her field of vision she could see the shining white silk of his clothing move and flow with him. Kagome kept her eyes trained on the floor.

Neither of them said anything. Somewhere, very far away, a siren howled, a reminder of the city - the time and place - that surrounded them.

Silence settled.

Well, crap, Kagome thought miserably after a moment. She hadn't really thought this far ahead in her rescue plans - perhaps trying to inure herself to the disappointment she had thought was inevitable - but really, what should one say in this situation?

She was clueless as her brain flipped frantically through its playbook, desperately searching for the proper etiquette for the circumstances, but was unfortunately coming up with a blank. Nothing worked. 'What's new?' was ridiculous, 'you held up well, I guess being buried alive suits you!' was just insulting, and 'haven't seen you in a while, what have you been doing?' would just rub it in.

She could feel him staring at her.

Wiping the last tears from her cheeks, Kagome took a deep, shaky breath, and looked up at him.

Sesshoumaru gazed back. He sat very still, the blue moonlight painting him in sharp relief against the soft darkness of the shrine, sliding down his high cheekbones, pulling the brightness of his markings down into dark indigo, sheltering half his face in shadows. Golden eyes regarded her almost curiously.

Kagome felt a little pang in her chest.

He looked... fine, and almost disturbingly calm and collected, as if he had only been waiting a few hours instead of a few hundred years.

A thought struck her - what if the madoushi had been wrong? What if he truly had slept, the way Inuyasha had? What would he do? Was it even right to free him into this world that wasn't for him?

He was still staring at her. Say something! she commanded herself. If I were him, what would I want to hear from me?

Only one thing came to mind.

"I'm sorry!" Kagome blurted suddenly, the words slightly garbled in her haste.

Sesshoumaru blinked and cocked his head.

Shrugging, she looked at him helplessly. "I'm so sorry," she said again, her hands fluttering uselessly in a gesture of surrender.

With vague despair, she watched as his face melted into its faint, customary scowl.

It wasn't enough, was it? Nothing would ever be enough, he would never forgive her for this, and all she could say was -

Sesshoumaru sniffed, and, in a movement far too graceful for one that had been immobile for the past several centuries, unfolded his body until he was standing. Mutely, Kagome watched as he stepped from the hole in the floor and brushed tiny bits of sawdust from his sleeves. When he was done, he looked back down at her.

"Do not be a bore, Kagome," he said.

Kagome blinked at him.

Then, in the depths of her brain, something went clunk.

"What?" she demanded. Hastily, she scrambled to her feet with significantly less grace than he had employed to stand in front of him, swaying dizzily under the sudden change in altitude. "What did you just say?"

Sesshoumaru quirked a brow in that way she both adored and hated. The shadows of his face creased and deepened as he smirked at her.

"I said, do not be a bore," he repeated. "Only bores constantly apologize."

Kagome stared, repressing a primal scream of frustration.

He was just so... so him that she couldn't stand it!

"You bastard!" Kagome hissed. "Where's that knife?" Angrily she whirled away from him with resounding rejection. The effect was only slightly spoiled by her traitorous right foot, which chose that moment to slip dangerously on the rubble.

For his part, it was dawning on Sesshoumaru that he had probably failed to say the right thing, though, given their history together, why Kagome should be surprised by this was a total mystery. Frankly, he had thought she would appreciate a little levity. This did not appear to be the case.

As she slid perilously over the floor he made a move to catch her before she fell, but impressively her ire seemed to override the laws of physics, and, righting herself with righteous indignation, she flounced out of his reach, kicking splinters of wood this way and that as she went.

"You absolute prick!" she was saying. "I'm going to get one of those knives, and then I'm going to stab you in the goddamn face, and I'm going to seal you back up and only let you out after you've learn some goddamn manners, and before you say it, no, bad manners don't count - "

"That will be unnecessary," Sesshoumaru cut in, a little too hastily. His limbs were not stiff but it was still strange to suddenly find himself in control of them again, and he wasn't sure he'd be quite quick enough to keep himself from becoming more perforated than he liked. Also, she would probably feel bad about it and start crying again, and that was not a desired outcome.

"And why not?" Kagome demanded, still rooting through the rubble, not caring how much noise she was making. "With less than ten freaking words you managed to make me forget exactly why I care about what happens to you. You piss me off so much, and if I don't find a knife soon I'm just going to give

up and strangle you instead. Arg!"

She felt her toes hit something hard and muffled a curse before bending down to pick up her gloves and crowbar and reminding herself that whacking him in the kneecaps probably wouldn't go over very well. It sure would be satisfying, though.

Her head hurt. He hadn't been awake five minutes and already he had given her such a whanging headache that each pounding of her heart sent a wave of pain through her skull and caused her vision to pulse alarmingly. He was a jerk. A big stupid jerk that had just spent four hundred years waiting for her to get it together and it was all her fault and now he had lost everything and... and he made light of the situation, and didn't kill her...

It would have been better if he were angry. It would have been better if there had been some way to repent. There wasn't, though. He had brushed off her apologies as if they didn't even matter.

"You are tired."

She started violently at his voice and whirled around, managing not to pratfall this time. "What?" she said inanely. "Oh... yes. But! That is beside the point! My state of mind has nothing to do with your rudeness."

"That," he said, stepping towards her, "is a matter for debate, and perhaps another time."

Oooo! He was just so damn arrogant -

He stepped in even closer, so close she had to tilt her head back to keep glaring at him.

Then he reached out and took her face in his hands.

Kagome promptly forgot how to breathe.

...Um.

Her skin rippled and shivered. Inside her skull, it was as though her mind had

been poured out, replaced with the heady scent of thunderstorms and forests, of wild snows and grey skies; it sent the world skating wildly away from her, dipping and turning as she swayed on suddenly trembling legs.

"You are still injured," she heard him say, and she could feel the deep rumble of his voice slide over her even as the movement of his lips dragged her gaze from his eyes to his mouth.

His mouth...

A thumb gently traced the bruise around her eye.

O - kay... Kagome thought distantly through the strange haze. This is... something. Very definitely something. Um.

Thinking was hard.

The pressure of his hands increased slightly; he was pulling her in, towards him, and Kagome felt her legs move sluggishly, stumbling forward -

The sound of rubble shifting beneath her feet reached her, jerking her out of her strange trance. Without thinking she took a step back and pulled away, her heart still pounding at the base of her throat.

"We should get out of here," she blurted, her voice coming out hoarse and breathless.

She watched as Sesshoumaru blinked, his hands still suspended between them. He seemed confused.

"It's just that, uh, we're in a shrine," she managed. "I broke quite a few written and unwritten laws to, uh, get you out. So we should go."

He still did not respond, so she just shrugged, helplessly, kicking herself for interrupting... well, whatever it was that he had been meaning to do. Apparently she was still the world's leading expert at screwing herself over. Miserably she looked away.

In the privacy of his head, Sesshoumaru was cursing surprisingly colorfully

and hurriedly rewriting his script.

It pained him deeply. It had been a good script, painstakingly crafted over several centuries, lovingly revised and rearranged until it had been utterly perfected. She had already skipped over the first part by failing to leap into his arms immediately upon his release, but that hadn't been strictly necessary. What had been necessary was the part where he pulled her to him, she melted into his embrace, and together they would engage in one or more strenuous yet enjoyable activities. Then he would take a nap, wake up the next morning refreshed - maybe dabble in a little light conquering before lunch - and go from there.

But now that was all shot to hell and he was going to have to improvise. Dammit.

"All right," he said abruptly. "Let us go."

He reached out.

Kagome barely had time to raise her head in mild surprise. She almost didn't even see him move. One minute she was just standing there and the next she was being dragged out the door and down the moonlit steps of the shrine by her wrist. He hadn't even looked to see if anyone was there.

"Hey, wait - " she stuttered breathlessly, her tired feet tripping to keep up with his long strides. Her toe caught in one of the flagstones of the courtyard and she stumbled forward.

God! Four hundred years certainly hadn't made him more progressive; he still seemed to think he could manhandle her whenever the fancy struck him.

"Hey!" she cried, momentarily forgetting her potential legal perils should she be caught with a cantankerous demon in the middle of a vandalized shrine. Angrily she yanked her arm from his grasp. In front of her he skidded to an abrupt stop and cast an annoyed glance back at her over his shoulder.

"What?" he demanded.

"Keep your voice down!" she hissed. "And what the hell do you think you're

doing? You don't even know where I live!"

His golden eyes glinted. "Very well," he said after a moment. "By all means, lead the way, Kagome."

"Fine!" she snapped. "This way!" Clenching her hands into fists Kagome stomped past him, acutely aware both of how exposed they were and how little she cared. She could almost feel him smirking at her behind her back as they made their way out into the Tokyo night.

It took less than five minutes to walk the half block to her flat. Kagome kept glancing behind her to see Sesshoumaru peering about him he trailed behind. He didn't seem particularly surprised, merely curious, though in typical Sesshoumaru fashion this curiosity lasted a whole of two seconds before he appeared to assimilate whatever anomaly he was observing and subsequently lost interest. Around them the stillness of the early morning hours pressed in, belying the bustle that would probably begin in less than an hour. Kagome hurried on.

"This is it," she said at last, stopping in front of the lobby door; behind the glass the foyer was deserted as a tomb. She watched as Sesshoumaru looked up at the facade with mild disappointment.

"What's wrong?" she asked, feeling a familiar exasperation creep up her spine. She was definitely too tired to deal with this crap in a calm manner.

For a moment he didn't reply, then shook his head. "Oh," he said absently, "they make so much noise; I thought they would be more aesthetically pleasing than this."

Kagome felt her mouth twist. "So you were awake all that time?" she asked.

Sesshoumaru glanced down at her, an odd look on his face. "Yes, of course," he replied.

"Oh." Arg! "Uh... what was it like?"

He raised a brow. "Boring," he said. "What else would it be like?"

And you didn't... you know... go insane? she wanted to ask, but for some reason it seemed to be a ridiculous question to ask someone. Oh, by the way, are you bonkers? Just asking!

Wearily she shook her head, turned to the door, and opened it. Together they went inside and up the stairs.

When the door finally clicked into place behind her Kagome felt herself visibly sag. Closing her eyes, she leaned against it and tried to take calming breaths, wondering just how the hell she had ended up here.

One minute he was asleep, the next he was awake. One minute they were in the shrine with four hundred years between them, and the next they were bickering as if only four minutes had passed. It seemed like there should have been more to it than this, and yet here she was... and there he was... behind her...

Warily she turned and peeked at him from the corner of her eye.

She could not see him very well, here in the darkest hours of the morning, but only his features were blurred; his figure stood out against the gloom, pale and luminous and old. He was standing very still; the dim light that filtered in through the windows cast most of his face in shadow, but she could still see the eerie gleam of his golden eyes staring intently at her. Inhuman. Predatory.

A little shiver, like an icy feather trailing over her skin, brushed up her spine, but there was no fear in it. Her fingers twitched against the wood of the door, and, low in her belly, something tightened in unknown anticipation.

"Let me see your injuries."

The sudden rumble of his voice in the silence reverberated through her head, and Kagome found herself stepping towards him without pausing to reconsider.

Good. She didn't want to reconsider.

Dreamily, she moved forward.

His hands floated through the darkness to meet her, alighting on either side of her face and sending a heady wave of heat straight through the center of her brain.

"Um - " Kagome stammered, mouth running on automatic as he loomed over her, "let me turn on a light so you can see better - "

"Unnecessary."

"But - "

A warm, smooth thumb traced over her lip, catching softly on the broken skin there. A tiny stab of pain sparked against the fog in her head.

"Oh," she breathed. Instinctively her tongue flickered against the wound to soothe it, brushed over his skin. Over the pounding of her heart, she heard his sharp intake of air, saw his golden eyes flicker.

Then his hands were sliding down her shoulders, fingertips trailing down the tender backs of her arms before sweeping forward and in to rest against her ribs, just beneath her breasts.

Don't, she thought, plaintive and desperate.

Don't stop there.

With painstaking care, he began to explore.

She couldn't seem to catch her breath, couldn't seem to form a coherent thought; somewhere, far away from here, outside her mind, all her doubts gathered, calling to be let in, calling for her to be sensible, but their voices were soft and muffled and she didn't care. She was tired, and he was warm, and her body ached -

Kagome swallowed hard.

"Sesshoumaru..."

The painfully gentle probing of his fingers eased, hovered tantalizingly. She

wanted to take his hands in hers, guide them over her body, up over the soft swell of her breasts, down and under to the shadowed spaces where she burned.

In the hollow of her chest, Kagome felt the dark and hungry thunder of her heart.

She should have been frightened by the intensity of it, should have run far away, but she didn't want to; there was no reason to look behind her any more. There was no reason to be afraid. But she didn't want to presume, either.

She had to know.

Nervously, she licked her lips.

"What - " she said, breathlessly, " - what are you doing?"

The question dropped into the darkness between them, falling like lead to the ground. The air was thick with the din of silence, choked with things unsaid, and she wanted to snap the tension, wanted to abandon all pretense, but something held her back. It was not her pretense that needed to be shed.

I would have waited for you, she thought distantly. I would have waited for the rest of your life.

Kagome held her breath and waited, listening to the hammering of her heart in her head.

Sesshoumaru struggled with his reticent brain to decipher her meaning - he could feel the heat of her rolling off her body in waves, carrying the heady scent that obliterated all other thoughts from his mind.

He had been... checking for injuries. Even as they made their way without haste here to this place saturated with her scent, she had held her body stiffly, as though her very skin hurt her.

It was terrifying how fragile she was, how easily hurt. How quickly she could die. He'd almost forgotten that she could die in the time it took to fall down a mountainside, the time it took to shoot an arrow, the time it took to be sealed

away. All it took for her to be lost forever was the space of a breath.

It only took a moment to die.

Beneath his aching fingers, he could feel the rise and fall of her ribs as she panted from his touch. Her question still hung in the air.

Slowly, Sesshoumaru blinked.

"I am - " he began -

- then stopped, startled.

To his own ears his voice was rough, his breathing ragged; he could hear himself coming undone, unraveling to weave himself around her, through her, binding himself to this mortal creature.

And he thought, There is still time to walk away.

His brain went cold -

- he was so tired, and the woman in front of him didn't bring him new life, didn't even make him forget how tired he really was, but here, now, with Kagome, all his tattered thoughts and all his melancholy weariness were suddenly not so staggering, were just a part of him -

- and then the chill was gone, taking the echo of habit with it.

"Sesshoumaru?" he heard her whisper tremulously.

And then he thought: One day she will never speak again.

She could die in a moment, and it would leave him tired and worn, hollow through and through. but, really, in the end, that was okay.

Because surely, if it was possible to die in a moment, then surely, surely it was possible to live in one as well.

Deliberately, breathlessly, he met her gaze. Lifted his hands to her face, wove

his fingers into her hair, pulled her to him.

He heard her gasp as she tumbled in to rest against him, her eyes going wide at his boldness, and it was so sweetly innocent that he felt the corners of his lips curve into a tiny smile.

Slowly, he leaned in, and in the cacophonous quiet, he murmured:

"I am weary of wasting your time."

Then Sesshoumaru bent his face to hers. Pressed burning lips to burning lips -

- and all his sadness, his weariness, his weakness shrank before her, skittered away like shadows melting before the rising sun -

- and now that she was standing in the moment she had hoped for, now that they had crossed that line into this unexplored country, Kagome thought she would die.

It was so overwhelming, so immediate and intimate that it couldn't last, there was no way her body could withstand it, and there was nothing in the universe except his mouth on hers, hot and soft and so, so urgent.

She could read his intent in the delicious pressure of his mouth. She knew what he wanted, what he needed, and just the barest thought of his naked body on hers sent a blazing heat rocketing through her, turning her bones to glass.

Unable to help herself, Kagome made a soft, pleading noise, reached up, twined her arms around him, his cool, silky hair running through her fingers like water. Her skin was too tight, electrified by the feel of his fingers against her face, and she wanted more.

And there was nothing to hold them back any longer.

She let her tongue escape to flicker against his mouth, reveling in the dark, clean taste of him as his lips parted and he tangled his tongue with hers.

Crowded, clash and slip and slide, the demanding circle of his arms... every

part of him spoke to her of the predator that slept behind his eyes - she could feel the strength in his hands, the wild, electric energy of his youki, could feel the sharp, dangerous points of his fangs brush lightly over her tongue as she explored his mouth. He was so alien, so perilous that a dark thrill coursed up her spine, but there was no fear at all, only the need for him that blazed inside her.

His hands were everywhere, down her back, splayed over her ribs, brushing up her stomach, leaving little furrows of flame branded into her flesh as he kissed her. Eagerly her fingers abandoned his hair, smoothed their way down to his chest until she felt the thick, reinforced edge of his kimono, double folded silk sliding beneath her hands, and then she was working her way downwards, feeling the gentle, rounded hem curve down and under, and then her fingertips met the thinner under-kimono.

And then, just a little further, and she was brushing against bare skin.

She felt his breath catch in his throat, gasping against her lips.

He was warm, too warm, too good to be real. Almost of their own volition her boldly shaking hands slipped over him, the firm, smooth muscle of his chest, snaking between his skin and his clothes, and then she shoved the fabric from his shoulders, exposing his bare chest to her curious touch.

With an agonized groan, he broke away from her. The loss of him was almost painful, and she whimpered in protest.

Don't leave - don't leave me here like this -

But then he was clumsily shrugging out of his kimono, leaving it to hang messily about his waist, and reached for her again. Kagome remembered the first time she had seen him like this, so many years in the past, remembered how badly she had wanted to touch him even then - and now she could. Wonderingly she reached out, pressed her hands to his scalding skin, and he felt so smooth and strong that she wanted nothing more than to pull him around her, live forever cradled in his body.

Then she felt a low rumble race through his chest, and he was back, holding her close, his hands pulling her hips to his in primal urgency, his mouth

working feverishly down her body. Kagome moaned.

Sesshoumaru felt himself falling - her kiss had stripped him of the centuries, had shredded his self control, and now, inside their conflagration, the strange, shadowy, wild place inside of him seemed to uncoil, stretching its wings to the sky.

He was starving for her - hungrily he opened his mouth, tried to devour her as he moved over her jaw, down to her throat, and through the searing fog he heard her cry out as she tipped her head, exposing herself to him, begging for more. Her hands were trembling against his arms as she held him closer, urged him to take what he wanted, and she tasted good, like nothing he could describe - he held her fast to him as he rasped his tongue over the tender line of flesh that trailed from her ear to her shoulder, relishing the flavor of her as she moaned plaintively and pressed in closer.

Her soft belly moved tantalizingly over his hardened length.

A strangled noise escaped him as Sesshoumaru felt himself sway alarmingly beneath the wave of heat that threatened to pull him under, but even through the dizzying desire he could feel her little hands - her scarred, calloused warrior's hands - working away at his obi as she rubbed herself against him.

Feverishly he scraped his fangs over her throat. Over the pounding of his heart, he heard her call his name.

Then she was stepping back, moving somewhere past where they stood, her hands still tugging at his hakama. Her dark eyes beckoned him.

"This way," Kagome said, her voice rich and throaty with arousal. "My bedroom."

Sesshoumaru found this suggestion acceptable.

She turned from him and he followed as she lead the way, never taking his eyes from her form - it was as though someone had stripped away a veil, allowing him to see her clearly for the first time, and everything about her called out to the wildness inside him. No longer tentative, no longer perhaps, but yes and please and -

Though she was not looking behind her, Kagome could still feel his gaze as she tugged him towards her room; each imagined glance was like a physical caress, driving her higher and higher. Between her legs, in the aching tips of her breasts, the pressure mounted, begging for release.

She should have been embarrassed at her boldness, should have thought twice about it, but in the pit of her stomach something rebelled, quashed all maidenly qualms, and she was sick of shrinking away from what she wanted. Maybe tomorrow she would blush madly, maybe tomorrow she would have second thoughts, but none of that mattered right now.

Right now, she had to have him. She needed him, and something in the way he touched her, something in the way he looked at her made her think that maybe, just maybe, he needed her, too.

Hyperaware of the sensations around her - the plush carpet giving way beneath her bare feet, the dim light of the streetlamps floating in through the window, the harsh, labored sound of breathing in the early morning silence - Kagome swallowed hard and stepped into her room, each light footfall carrying her closer and closer to the softness of the bed.

She was just two steps away from her goal when his arms were suddenly wrapping around her, pulling her back, tucking her into his body as his hands slipped beneath her shirt and his mouth found her ear. The tip of his tongue traced the winding folds as his ragged breath curled inside her head.

Kagome shuddered as the world rippled around her. Knees buckling, she fell back against him, the hot, bare skin of his chest scorching her through the clothing she still wore - blindly, she reached up, her fingers finding his hair again, and there - there - below the small of her back, something hard nudged her intimately.

Her mouth went dry.

In the vaguely functioning part of his brain that was not completely fixated on the woman in his arms, Sesshoumaru was beginning to feel slightly dissatisfied by the garment situation. He had not, admittedly, had sex in a very, very long time, but he did seem to vaguely recall that there were generally

fewer clothes involved than the amount currently employed, and he was beginning to get impatient. Kagome seemed to think so, too - the moment his fingertips brushed over her soft stomach she sighed sweetly and rubbed against him in the most delicious, dizzying way.

Breathlessly he smoothed his way upwards, and as his fingers gently traced along the fine scars left behind by old battles, along the still-fresh wounds inflicted by the villagers when they had torn her away from him, he felt a strange, irrational surge of pride.

He turned her in his arms, ran his teeth along her earlobe, tugged at the hem of her shirt.

"Let me see," he murmured hoarsely, his lips brushing over her ear as she trembled in his embrace.

"Yes," he heard her whisper, and then she was peeling the soft, dark material from her skin, lifting it over her head, tossing it to the floor.

The sharp scent of her nervous need filled his head. Sesshoumaru sank to his knees before her.

Wrapping an arm around her, he spread his hand against her back, holding her in place as her trembling fingers found his shoulders. With agonizing care, he let his mouth trail over the angry lines imprinted across her abdomen, traced the memories of her courage with his tongue, and then his other hand found her still-clothed breast.

Suddenly she was quaking and helpless, almost unable to stand, her scarred little fingertips weaving their way through his hair, her soft cries filling his head as his fingers gently closed over her. His tongue wandered, dipping down into her navel as his other hand slid down over her rounded hips, traced down and in to the darkness between her legs.

Slowly, deliberately, he pressed one long finger against her.

She whimpered and squirmed, pushed back, tried to ride his hand with rocking hips.

"Sesshoumaru - "

He could hear the pounding of her heart over his own.

" - please."

In one breathless moment Kagome felt the world tip and tumble, and then against her back she felt the mattress give way, creaking gently as Sesshoumaru settled himself over her, and oh, god, the feel of his weight bearing down on her sent white-hot blades of pleasure through her body.

One hard, muscled thigh insinuated itself between her legs as she raked her fingernails over his chest. To her delight he made a strange noise in his throat, his hips rocking instinctively, pressing his burning erection into her thigh, and she gasped at the sensation, at the knowledge of what was going to happen, of what she was doing and who she was doing it with.

The ache at the cleft of her legs intensified - she was empty, so empty - restless, needy, she shifted against him, renewed her battle with his obi as his breath trailed ragged edges over her throat. A claw traced over her skin, following the line of her collarbone, the swell of her breast before dipping beneath the lace of her bra.

The room hitched when he slipped the strap from her shoulder and peeled the lace away, exposing her to the cool air, and when he finally, finally sucked one aching tip into his mouth, Kagome sobbed with pleasure. The feel of his tongue rasping over her nipple made her back arch as she moaned, and he took the opportunity to slide his arms beneath her, lifting her up, tugging her legs around his waist as he rocked back onto his knees, and then that searing length was pressed against her.

Her neck went limp as she threw her head back and rubbed herself over him, trying to ease the nearly painful ache he inspired in her. She could feel the tug of his mouth all the way down to her curling toes.

"Please," she gasped, barely even aware of her own voice. "Please. More."

Kagome heard the sudden rumble deep in his chest - a growl so low that she could feel it rolling through her, shaking her heart - and then he released her

breast and dragged his fangs over her collarbone as he abandoned all pretense of civility by neatly slicing through the back of her bra. His hot, greedy fingers pulled it down her arms, and then she was sliding it off, tossing it to the floor as he spread one large hand against her back and pressed her to him, rubbing her breasts over his thrumming skin.

This was - she wanted -

It was so hard to think, so hard to know what he would like and what he wouldn't, but his hands on her were maddening, and she wanted him to be as crazy for her as she was for him.

Shyly, Kagome nuzzled his throat.

Against her back, on the swell of her hip, she felt his claws twitch convulsively, leaving little tiny pinpricks behind. Encouraged, she leaned in, boldly brushed her mouth against his hammering pulse, then parted her lips and suckled lightly, letting her tongue flicker against him.

She felt rather than heard his needy moan against her mouth, and then he was curling around her, pressing harder into the sweltering darkness between her thighs. The world blurred.

Sesshoumaru felt drugged as he shuffled off the last tatters of his self-control, half-wild with the strength of his want. He could smell her, could smell the slickness that gathered for him, rich and heady and intoxicating, and he was so hard it burned.

Unceremoniously he tipped her onto her back and knelt between her legs, the strange, stiff fabric of her clothes rough against his hands as he ran his fingers over the strange fastenings that kept her from him. Growling in frustration, he clicked his claws against the metal.

Her hand fell over his. He glanced up.

In the dim, silvery light she so looked incredible - flush and helpless, her soft lips parted as her breathing became more and more labored, her long dark hair spread over the soft, cool bedding - that he felt himself go still, unable to comprehend just how he had managed to reach this point, nor how it could

feel so good to be here.

Fortunately Kagome seemed to have no such problems; instead she gave him a soft, nervous smile, and then slowly began to undo the fastenings of her clothing.

His breath caught as she slowly worked her hips free of the constraining cloth, taking her undergarments with it, and then with a slight contortion and one quick tug she was free.

Her intoxicating scent hit him; with something akin to reverence he slid his hands up her strong legs, up and up, towards the place that called out for his attention. Quite by accident, his fingers caught on the scar left by her training, the one that had scared him so badly, and a fierce possessive need welled up below his heart, buoying it into his throat.

He reached up, let the back of one finger glide over her slick, waiting flesh as he watched her face, trying to get a feel for what she wanted of him.

Beneath his hand she groaned softly and pressed forward before suddenly pulling herself up, her hands finding his obi, loosening it further, what she wanted writ clear on her face. Overwhelmed, he let her attack his clothing, pulling and tugging until a sweet noise of triumph escaped her as it, too, was tossed to the floor, and she peeled away the front panel of his hakama, parted his kimono, exposing him to her curious eyes.

He thought he was going to explode. Desperately he reached out, brought her face to his for another starving kiss, and then he felt her calloused hands close around his quivering erection.

"Kagome," he whispered hoarsely, letting his need trip from his tongue to hers as she moaned into his mouth and gave him one experimental, mind-blowing stroke.

In one crowded moment, Kagome found herself on her back again as Sesshoumaru hastily divested himself of the last of his clothing, and then he was looming over her, his cool, beautiful hair - his stupid, stupid pretty hair - cascading over his body to pool against her hot skin. For a long second, he simply looked down at her, his golden eyes gleaming brightly, his heaving

chest brushing over hers with each labored breath. His elbows dug into the mattress on either side of her, his body trembling -

- and the look on his face was so desperately tender, so lost and wanting, that she didn't even notice that her hands had stayed around him until he closed his eyes and gave one slow, luxurious thrust, his satiny skin sliding easily through her fingers. The soft, damp head of his erection brushed over her slick folds in an electrifying caress.

The world fluttered, flickered in and out, her eyes rolling back as she arched upwards.

"Ready?" she heard him murmur over the roar of blood in her ears, and Kagome looked up at him, opened her mouth to tell him yes, yes, god yes, she was ready, should have been ready a long time ago, but even as the words climbed up her throat, she stiffened at the sight of him -

- the stripes on his face were seeping over his skin in jagged lines, his bared teeth just a little sharper than normal, and he looked so untouchable, so strangely luminous in the dim light -

- and all of a sudden, Kagome was shocked to remember that he was a beautiful creature.

Of course, she had always known, but she hadn't thought of him that way in a long while. He no longer really existed in her head as an image; instead, he was a landscape, fashioned of stories, full of shadowed secrets that only she knew, and she was suddenly awestruck by the strange disconnect between the beautiful demon hovering over her and the man she knew lived behind those eerie, otherworldly eyes.

She wanted him so badly, but could not speak -

The moment dragged out, punctuated only by the sound of his strained breathing, by the sound of her hungry heart.

Then he blinked, and the moment snapped out of existence as lowered his head, let his tongue flick over her throat, let his breath curl hotly in her ear, and whispered urgently: "You may admire me later, Kagome. Right now, tell

me if you are ready."

And Kagome smiled.

This was not a dream. He was real, he was here, here, and he was so... so him, so not what she would have chosen. He was arrogant and proud, cold, rude, self-centered, and he wasn't even particularly good or kind, and when he was it was usually by accident, but somehow none of that really seemed like a such bad thing after all.

Funny how it worked out like that.

Kagome reached for him, one arm twining around his neck, the other hand moving between her thighs to guide him to her. She hooked her legs around his waist, nudged his hips with hers, the empty ache inside her raging for release.

She heard him groan with pleasure as he lowered himself, burying his face in her hair and inhaling her scent as she whimpered plaintively. The head of his erection nestled firmly against her -

- and then he was pressing into her with an agonizing slowness, filling the emptiness with himself.

Kagome felt the world go blank -

- and then there was nothing but his trembling body -

- nothing but the long, languorous spread of him as he moved forward -

- nothing but his tattered breath dragging over her -

- nothing but the painful pleasure as her body bloomed before him -

- opened wide and invited him in -

- and then he was inside her, filling her completely, and there was nothing between them any longer, no separation, no past, no future, no thought - just... this.

It was like nothing she had ever known. Not completion, not a joining of two parts to make the whole, not an end or a beginning or anything in between, but simply -

- the way it truly was.

...and he had been a part of her, had known her so intimately, had dwelled in her heart for so long now that this was just -

- just...

The world went quiet with epiphany.

And then Kagome was reveling in revelation, drowning in the feel of him against her, the in feel of him inside her, in his sweat-slick skin, in his pleasure-parted lips, in his scorching body, in all the tiny ecstasies of him that threatened to consume everything that was her -

This is true, she thought.

This is true.

Above her, Sesshoumaru struggled for air. She felt so good, so incredibly good, just as slick and snug as he knew she would be, and he was almost afraid to move for fear that the intensity of her, of all of this, would grab his heart and wring it dry. Tightly, he shut his eyes.

Then, to his utter shock, she moved under him, drawing back just a little before pressing forward again, instinctually seeking the pleasure she knew he could give her, and it was too much, too much.

With a strangled groan, Sesshoumaru pulled out, his brain going white and fuzzy at the edges, and then thrust forward again, gasping at the soft, slick, searing heat of her, at the way she parted before him, at the way her body gripped his -

Beneath him, Kagome cried out and wiggled in discomfort and pleasure at the invasion. He clenched his teeth, feeling every move she made ripple around

him, and tried to hold himself perfectly still. For a long moment his body pulled taut with the effort of it, of not hurting her, of staying here with her as long as possible.

Then he heard her whimper, felt her fingers thread their way through his hair, dragging shivers behind them.

"I'm sorry! ...please, don't stop," she whispered, her voice strange and desperate, her breath hot as it ghosted over his ear, her whole body arching like a bow as she slid against him. "I'm sorry I'm not... Please, I'm not scared. Don't stop."

He wanted to tell her that it was okay, that this was all he wanted, was what he had chosen, that he would have waited a thousand years, ten thousand years just for this, don't be sorry, don't be sorry, but he couldn't find breath enough for speech, and Sesshoumaru could feel all her heartbreaking trust, all the beautiful briefness of the moment wind around him and bind them together, and there was no more fear, just her, just now -

His lips found hers in the darkness, kissed her softly. Then, slowly, he rocked his hips against her.

"Yes," she hissed against his mouth, and then she was straining with him in a helpless rhythm, each urgent undulation begging him to ease the pain of her desire.

Panting, he angled himself against her, knowing that he wouldn't be able to hold out for long, needing her to come, and then he felt himself burn over just the right spot inside her and she cried out, a pleading, shuddering sound, and closed around him.

If he could have, he would have smiled.

She was perfect, pressed into the mattress with his weight; her legs were locked high around his waist, her hands raking hungrily over his body, along his back, over his hips, down his stomach as though she could taste him in her fingertips. Sesshoumaru could hear her gasp in revelation with every thrust.

"Oh," she whispered rhythmically. "Oh, oh, oh - "

Kagome was dying - this was too much, was so much more than anything she had ever known, and each time he rocked against her she blazed, bright and dark, toes curling, pressure mounting. Her hands tangled in his hair, sliding against his sweat-slick back. Soft moans escaped, sounds she had never thought she would make, and he answered her with his own heavy breath and low growls, moving deep within her, and she couldn't take it, wanted it to never end, wanted to crawl inside him - desperately she clung to him, her legs hooked over his hips, her teeth sinking into his shoulder, his clean, salty taste filling her head. She heard him groan her name, and the world was drawing taut, humming, tighter and tighter, and it was going to break, she was going to break -

"Sesshoumaru!"

- and the world snapped, washed over her, sent her reeling, tumbling over and over into the darkness -

Her legs tightened, drawing him in, so deep he thought he would be lost inside her forever, and then the ruthless ripple of her body reached through him and pulled -

- and then his hips jerked forward beneath the wave of pleasure so intense it was almost pain, thrusting, violent, bestial, as she drew him out of himself and he poured into her...

Slowly the world faded back into focus.

Above her Sesshoumaru collapsed, barely keeping his weight from her as he rolled to the side, still clasped inside.

Kagome stretched languorously, twining her arms around him as he nuzzled her cheek and slowly slid out, sending one last zing of pleasure through her veins. Her legs were trembling, her body still sparking with the aftershocks, but there was nothing in her except satisfaction and a strange, fierce tenderness.

"Mmmm," she sighed.

His lips brushed over her brow, and immediately she strained upwards caught him in a long, soft kiss.

"Mm," she said again, breaking away and drawing back a little to look at him. She could feel the collected traces of them sliding down her thighs, and it was probably going to ruin her bedspread, but she couldn't bring herself to care. Perfectly and utterly contented with the world, Kagome burrowed into his arms and listened to the soothing sound of his breathing returning to normal.

"That was good," she murmured sleepily as he brushed her damp locks from her neck.

His sharp little laugh buzzed against her nose. "You expected me to be bad?" he asked softly. She could the stirring of his breath in her hair.

Kagome smiled into his skin, already drowsing. "No," she mumbled, "I expected you to be great. For god's sake, just take the compliment already..."

He watched her fall asleep before closing his own eyes.

And in his mind, as he drifted off, Sesshoumaru gently folded the moment around them and lived there forever.

i only want you to see / my favorite part of me: Finally. I'm done. It really couldn't have been done without Technoelfie, who has been an incredible beta reader; without her, I don't know if this story would have been finished. Thank you, my dear.

Anyway. I keep forgetting to mention, but I have a fanlisting, which is linked in my FFnet profile. This chapter is dedicated to the amazing Mikomi13, who runs it. And with a nod to Kuro, who inspired one of the scenes in this chapter with her picture "Pinwheels and Sodapop."

Tales from the House of the Moon
by
Resmiranda

Chapter Thirty-Eight

"If a maiden sits on the ground in a clearing in a forest where a unicorn lives, they say, the unicorn will come to her and put its head in her lap. That is the best way to catch a unicorn. This procedure must have been discovered by a maiden who sat down in a clearing with no intention of catching a unicorn. The unicorn with its head in her lap must have been an embarrassment. What next?"
- Kurt Vonnegut, Fates Worse Than Death

* * *

There were issues to work out, of course.

"So let me get this straight," Kagome said slowly. "What you're saying is that you're not mad at me for dethroning you, blighting your house, and sentencing you to four-hundred years of physical stasis?"

Still sprawled across the bed, Sesshoumaru sighed with more than a little exasperation. "No I am not, and do not make me repeat myself again, lest I reverse my position on the matter," he said firmly, looking far more threatening that anyone draped with a Hello Kitty sheet had any right to be.

He's naked under that sheet, Kagome thought, trying to keep her gaze from settling on his exquisitely muscled calf dangling over the side. She wished that she were still naked, too, but upon waking the need for a shower had asserted itself and it had seemed silly to not get dressed. Now, however, she was questioning the wisdom of that decision. Slightly dazed, she shook herself. "But..." she started, then trailed off. He was pinning her with a glare.

Well! Two could play that game! Resolutely she lifted her chin and glared right back. "But I still feel responsible," she snapped at him. "The guilt is awful!"

"I fail to see how that is my concern," Sesshoumaru said blandly. "However, if it would assuage your guilt, you may take those clothes off and come to bed."

Stamping her foot, Kagome grabbed a stray stuffed animal and threw it at him. It bounced off his head. "ARGH!" she cried. "Is that all this is to you? Just... what I owe you?"

He was looking affronted and vaguely abashed. "I said that you may think of it that way, if it helps you."

"Well, it doesn't."

"Very well."

There was a silence as she glared at him, her arms crossed defensively in front of her. She watched as he appeared to choose his next words carefully. It looked like he was having a difficult time; he probably hadn't had much practice.

He gave her a sidelong glance. "So..." he finally said. "Will you divest yourself of your clothing anyway?"

Stupid men! Kagome lamented in her head. The fact that she was sorely tempted certainly did nothing to make the situation more bearable. "No, I won't! There are some things we should discuss first. Like... you know."

Frowning slightly, Sesshoumaru blinked in confusion. "I assure you I do not."

"Yes, you do. Like... what now? What are you... you know, going to do? Where are you going to go?"

"I had assumed I would stay here," he replied. "Unless you have a compelling reason for me to be elsewhere...?"

She hadn't thought of it like that. "Um... no. But... god, I don't know what I'll tell my roommate, not to mention my family! And you'll need food, and clothes, and... and... you'll need a job, or something! I'm still a student!"

Sesshoumaru shrugged elegantly, drawing her attention to his well-formed shoulders. "I have my ways of procuring what I need."

"Yes, I was afraid of that. Damn, Sesshoumaru, I don't even know what... this

is."

"This?"

"You know... I don't know what we're doing."

"Nothing, currently."

"...I still feel terrible."

"Then you should come to bed. It's quite comfortable and accommodating."

"Yes, I know, because it's my bed."

"Just so. Pity about the sheets, though."

* * *

The living situation had to be dealt with.

"What's with the stuff on his face?" Ayumi asked. She was standing in the entryway of their flat, her still-packed bags lying forlornly about her feet, forgotten in the excitement of coming home from vacation to find a half-naked man rummaging through her refrigerator.

Sesshoumaru quirked a brow. Next to him, Kagome wanted to sink into the floor.

"Tattoos," she blurted. "They're, uh, religious."

Her roommate tipped her head to the side in her typical ditzy fashion. "Which religion?" she wanted to know.

Augh! Kagome decided. "Um... well, it's hard to say, I'm not sure of the exact name for it. It's very, uh... esoteric."

"And he's Inuyasha's brother?"

"Half-brother," Sesshoumaru corrected. Kagome wanted to punch him. She settled for making her voice as sickly-sweet as possible, just to get on his nerves.

"That's right, half-brother," she agreed. "They, uh, were never on the best of terms."

"Oh."

There was an awkward pause.

"Kagome, can I talk to you alone?" Ayumi asked.

Wah! Kagome thought, but outwardly she smiled and nodded. For some reason she found the request for privacy to be highly amusing. As Ayumi led the way into her own room, Kagome shot a glare over her shoulder and mouthed the words, Don't listen!

Sesshoumaru snorted as she closed the door behind her.

Once inside, Ayumi turned and placed her hands on her hips.

"What happened to your face?" she demanded.

Crap! She'd forgotten about the still-fading bruises. "I got into a fight," she said hastily.

"A fight."

"Yes! Yes, a fight. It was... a bunch of punk kids. They were trying to steal my purse," Kagome invented madly, "but that's okay because Sesshoumaru was with me, so... yeah."

"They attacked you with him there?"

"No! Of course not. He was... getting ice cream. We were in the park."

Ayumi crossed her arms, clearly dubious.

"It was hot," Kagome added as solemnly as possible.

"Uh-huh." She watched as her friend and roommate closed her eyes and pinched the bridge of her nose for a moment. Finally Ayumi looked up at her again.

"Kagome," she intoned, "does your mother know you're sleeping with your ex-boyfriend's punk brother?"

"Half-brother," came Sesshoumaru's muffled voice from the next room.

His intrusion barely registered with Kagome; Ayumi's question was such an uncharacteristic thing to hear coming from her mouth that it took a full three seconds for Kagome's brain to process what it heard and galvanize her tongue into action.

"What?" she almost squealed. "No! I mean, we're not sleeping together!"

"Yeah, right. I believe that."

Face flaming, Kagome said nothing.

Ayumi cleared her throat. "Okay, fine. Let us pretend that you're not sleeping with this guy. Is he staying here?"

Kagome at least had the decency to look away. "Yes," she said sullenly.

"And is he paying rent?"

"No."

"Is he going to?"

"Gee, I don't know," Kagome snapped. "I'm sure you'll make him start." Not that Ayumi wouldn't be perfectly justified in asking Sesshoumaru to pay for a third of what they used, but it did mean reality was starting to intrude, and she and Sesshoumaru had only had a day together. They needed a significantly longer, more rigorous, less clothed vacation than that. And then a vacation to recover from that vacation...

"Why doesn't he have his own place?" Ayumi asked, yanking her back into the real world, which was much less interesting than the one in her head. Kagome shrugged helplessly.

"Circumstances," she said. "There have been... circumstances. Look, I know this is really sudden, but it's fine. He'll... get a job. Pay for his share. It'll be fine."

Ayumi still didn't look convinced.

"Please?" Kagome clasped her hands together, giving her friend a pleading look.

With a sigh of resignation Ayumi shut her eyes and passed a hand over her face. "Okay," she said. "Just... don't be too loud."

"Ayumi!"

"And until he starts to pay his way..."

"Yes?"

"...he's not allowed to put a shirt on."

"Ayumi!"

* * *

There had been the family to deal with.

"Well. That went... interestingly," Kagome said once they were safely back inside her apartment. "Thanks for..."

"For?"

"Well... for not disemboweling anyone. And sorry about my brother. I should have explained to him that you were full youkai - I swear he wouldn't have

asked about your ears if he had known."

"It is of no consequence."

"And my grandfather is getting on in years..."

"That much is obvious."

"I'm sure if he hadn't been so tired he wouldn't have kept calling you Inuyasha."

"That is also of no consequence."

There was a long pause.

"Usually you do not look so dubious when I disrobe."

"What? Oh... no, I wasn't thinking about that. Hey, I didn't say you should put them back on!"

"Hn. What were you thinking of, then?"

"Just that you seem to have mellowed a bit. Back when I first met you, you wouldn't have let that sort of thing slide."

"I assure you, it is still a grievous trespass that warrants dire punishment."

"Then why didn't you do anything? You didn't seem bothered at all."

"Kagome, the price of murdering your family would have far outweighed the satisfaction."

"...Wait, what? You mean you actually thought about it? God! And what do you mean, price?"

"I mean, for instance, that you would no longer allow me to do this..."

"...oh."

"Or this..."

"...ah. I, uh, see. And, um... Gnng!"

"Indeed."

* * *

There were adjustments to be made as well.

"No, see, it's easy," Kagome said. "You take this little cap, and you put it over the stopper like this - "

Sesshoumaru watched with barely concealed boredom. He had only been mildly curious about the drink contained in the bottle with no immediately discernible openings, but Kagome had taken it as an invitation for a lesson. She did that often.

" - and then you just - " here she placed her hands over the green cap, "- push!"

With a loud clatter, a clear glass sphere shot into the body of the bottle, coming to a stop at the narrow neck; Kagome held her hands over it while it hissed slightly before removing them. "See?" she said. "Here, you try with this one."

Sesshoumaru gave her a dubious look before neatly slicing through the plastic wrapping and removing the green cap. He popped it out and placed it on the stopper. Then he pushed.

The bottle exploded.

Glass shards, coated with sticky, sugary soda, flew everywhere, embedding themselves in the walls, ceilings, and Sesshoumaru.

Kagome was spared, as through some sudden - and distinctly uncharacteristic - flash of clairvoyance, she had darted behind him at the very last second and used him as a shield.

There was silence for a long moment, punctuated only by the faint tinkle of glass as shards trickled into every available crack to be found months later by someone's foot.

"Well," Kagome said finally, "you sort of have the idea."

"Hn," Sesshoumaru postulated.

"Yeah. Um. Things aren't exactly made for youkai strength any more. Can you... you know, reign in your godlike power when handling modern objects? It might make things easier."

Slowly, Sesshoumaru turned and glared at her over his shoulder, letting her know that her flattery, while well deserved, was not getting her anywhere.

Kagome huffed. "Don't blame me! I didn't make any of this stuff!"

"Indeed," Sesshoumaru replied, plucking a piece of glass from his face. Kagome watched with vague fascination as the bloody wound closed over, leaving nothing behind.

"Sorry," she said, dazed. "Most things aren't like this; ramune bottles have a stupid design."

"Agreed. Shall we clean this up and try again?"

"Er... hehe. Um. Let's try again, and then clean up."

"I feel insulted."

"Did you know that you have glass up your nose?"

* * *

The question of what Sesshoumaru was going to do now also needed to be addressed.

"What about martial arts instructor?" Kagome suggested desperately. School

was starting tomorrow, and she was wary of leaving a bored taiyoukai alone in her apartment. This concern was less about whatever unsupervised interactions he might choose to have with the outside world and more about worrying if he were happy or not, since, to her surprise, Sesshoumaru seemed to fit quite neatly into human society. He achieved this by being insufferably cool and arrogant to whomever was unlucky enough to deal with him and by ignoring everyone else. He'd already reduced two retail clerks to tears and left a grocery store stockboy ashen-faced, and it had only been ten days since his release.

He also made no move to cover up his markings, his claws, or even his ears, and apparently everyone was entirely too polite to say anything about them. Sesshoumaru's world view seemed to rest on the assumption that whatever he did was the correct thing to do since it was he who was doing it, and then it sort of went from there; the surprising part was that his presence was such that this attitude seemed to override everyone else's thoughts on the matter. It left Kagome somewhat awestruck.

"No teaching," he said absently. "Remember what I said about accidentally killing my pupils? And seeing as we have yet to locate Tenseiga..."

With a small grimace, Kagome looked back down at her notebook. "Oh. Yeah. Forgot."

"Indeed."

From the corner of her eye, Kagome watched as Sesshoumaru scrutinized the algebra textbook in front of him before frowning and slowly turning it upside down. She gave a small inward sigh.

The question of the location of his weapons was... not exactly a sore spot, but an uncomfortable one. Though he certainly didn't need them they were still his, and she was certain that neither of them found it right that someone else might be in possession of such things.

"Well, at some point you're going to have to do something," she said, a little too loudly. "I have things to do during the day."

"Yes... school. You have mentioned it before," he replied, putting the algebra

book down. Then, as if he had been planning to do so all along, he reached across her desk and picked up the university course catalog. "And you study archaeology, which is the study of the past."

"Er, yeah. Sort of," Kagome said, shifting where she sat on her bed. "More the study of people in the past, but yes."

Sesshoumaru did not appear to be paying attention. "Hmm," he said thoughtfully, leafing through the pages.

'Hmm'? Kagome thought. She wasn't certain she liked the sound of that hmm. Whenever Sesshoumaru got into a contemplative mood he tended to follow whatever train of thought he was riding until the bitter end, and given the subject of their conversation Kagome felt that hmm did not bode well.

"You would be a good spy," she suggested.

"Hm." He turned another page.

Kagome squirmed.

"Chemistry," Sesshoumaru said suddenly.

"What?"

"What is chemistry?"

"Oh! Uh. Well... it's the study of... uh, the things that make up everything. The fundamental composition of the world. Elements and stuff."

"Elements? Like... water, fire, air...?"

She laughed nervously. "Not really. There are a lot more elements now than in the past."

Sesshoumaru looked up from the book in front of him and raised a dubious brow. "Do you mean to tell me that the fundamental composition of the world has changed in that time?"

"No! I mean, we've discovered more elements. And the old elements aren't really elements. It's a little complicated and I was never very good at it in the first place, so I'm not sure how to explain it."

Slowly he transferred his gaze back to the course catalog.

"Hm," he said again. Kagome was beginning to suspect that he was doing it only to get on her nerves, and wished that it wasn't working.

"What about... philosophy?"

This could not end any way but badly. Slowly Kagome lifted her fingers to her temples and began to massage them. "That's the study of... well, I'm not really sure. Thought? Meaning?"

"Hm."

Her head snapped up and she glared at him. "Stop that!" she exclaimed.

Over the top of the book, Sesshoumaru gave her a little smirk. "And what about... psychology?"

"Psychology? I guess you could call that the study of the mind."

"The mind?" He actually sounded interested.

Kagome shrugged. "You wouldn't like it. It's the study of the human mind."

"And of what use is that?"

She grinned at this; it was such a Sesshoumaru thing to say. "Well, usually people who study psychology go on to become therapists. I think I told you about them once, but basically they listen to people's problems and help solve them."

"How does knowing about the mind help solve problems?" he wanted to know.

Kagome shrugged. "Well, there are some problems that originate in the mind.

Emotional problems. Life problems. Usually whoever is having the problem is too close to it to see what they should do or think about it."

For a long moment, Sesshoumaru simply looked at her, his gaze strangely opaque. Then, slowly, he looked back down at the page in front of him.

"Psychology..." he murmured, thoughtful.

"Uh," Kagome said. "Yeah. Psychology."

"...Hmm."

* * *

"I still don't get how you were able to get into university without a high school diploma."

"You should know that I am very persuasive when need be."

"Should I? You're good at intimidating people, but that's not the same thing."

"I am good at persuading you."

"Yes, with your tongue. And not because you use it to speak."

"Hn."

"...Wait, you didn't sleep with the admissions staff, did you?"

"Of course not. I merely suggested that it would be in their best interests to allow me to attend their institution."

"You threatened them?"

"...Not in so many words, no."

"I don't even see why you need a degree. You would make a fantastic crime boss."

"...Hmm."

"No."

* * *

Sesshoumaru graduated with his doctorate only one year after Kagome finished hers.

"So not fair," she complained. "Not fair at all. You don't need to actually sleep every night. And you can smell emotions."

"Which is quite handy, I assure you," he replied, a little too smugly for her taste, as he adjusted the diploma on the wall next to hers, "though, alas, it is not the be all and end all of therapy. It is merely much simpler to determine if someone is lying to himself or to me at the outset. Less time is wasted."

"God. You're not even human, how can you be so good at understanding human emotions?"

Sesshoumaru shrugged. "I do not. One need not understand emotions to assist in rectifying the problems they cause."

"You make it sound so cut and dried. Sorry, I just... can't see you as a psychologist. It's not you."

"Well, at least it is an adequately diverting activity."

"Gah!" Kagome cried. "I can't believe you just called therapy 'diverting!'"

"But it is. In fact, psychology is incredibly diverting, especially as I do not actually have to be actively engaged with a patient to use it."

"Ugh."

"For example, I can tell that you are frustrated right now. It is a mundane problem, but the diverting part is assisting you in eliminating the stressors in

your life."

"Yeah, but I can't eliminate you."

"There are other ways of eliminating stress that do not involve actually removing stressors."

"Oh, really?"

"Indeed. Certain activities, for instance, are quite useful in relieving stress."

"I think I know where this is going..."

"Oh good. Then our session should adjourn."

"...To the bedroom?"

"If you insist."

* * *

It was surprisingly easy to settle into a normal life.

"I'm home!"

"Welcome back. I trust your day was satisfactory?"

"It was! We're still in the middle of setting up the display on Mesopotamia, but it's truly wonderful to be able to handle all those artifacts. They're all so old, thousands of years... I always feel privileged that I'm able to see and touch them."

"I am quite old myself."

"Yes, and I feel quite privileged to be able to see and touch you, too."

"As well you should."

"God, shut up. Anyway, how about you? Did you fix anyone today?"

"Not today. Today was rather dull."

"You say that at least once a week. I knew you wouldn't enjoy being a therapist."

"Did I indicate that I did not enjoy it?"

"Well, 'dull' usually means 'not interesting', so I have to assume you didn't."

"Simply because my clients are dull and stupid and are incapable of climbing out of the holes they dig for themselves, that does not mean I cannot entertain myself whilst they are jabbering away."

"Good grief!"

"Well, what would you have me do? For certain clients, it would be a waste of my time to actually listen to them."

"My, that's cold."

"It is simply the truth. I have already told them what to do about their problems, but it seems that some would rather wallow in their misery. It is a quite curious phenomenon, but not one that requires a great deal of my attention."

"So... what do you do instead. Wouldn't they be insulted if you started reading a book or something?"

"It takes no effort at all to tune them out."

"You're making me paranoid."

"How so?"

"Well, how do I know that you're ever listening to me?"

"You don't."

"See? Paranoid! I shouldn't have to guess as to whether or not you're paying attention. You should just... you know... do it."

"...I'm sorry, what did you say?"

"I said you're sleeping on the couch tonight."

"No you didn't."

"Ah-hah!"

* * *

Though he was not a creature of the modern world, there were always ways around it.

"You seem restless."

"Do I?"

"Yes, you do. You keep clicking your claws together and it's starting to freak me out!"

"Hn."

"No, not hn!"

"What, then?"

"Instead of going hn, how about you tell me what's bothering you."

"Perhaps I am restless."

"Okay... so what are you going to do about it?"

"I do not know. I..."

"You need to go hunting."

There was a long pause.

"...Yes."

"Okay. Go hunting, then."

"You were less than approving the last time I went."

"Because you tracked blood all over the carpet. Is it too much to ask that you at least rinse off after you go on a massacre?"

"...Perhaps."

"What did you hunt last time anyway?"

"Bears."

"Oh. I know! Why don't you go kill something in the ocean?"

"What is there to kill in the ocean?"

"Um. Sharks?"

"...You wish for me to go shark hunting."

"Sure, why not? Less bloody that way."

"No, just as bloody, but with blood in the water. Which would make it a self-perpetuating hunt."

"Look, you've been demolishing your pillows again in your sleep. You need this."

"...You know about that?"

"Of course. You think I don't know that you replace them on the sly? The down gets everywhere. And I do mean everywhere."

"Hn."

"Look. Just get out of here. Go kill something. You'll feel better, and I won't wake up with feathers in my crotch. Everyone wins."

"...What if I want you to have feathers in your- "

"Out!"

* * *

The past did not often assert itself, but when it did, it was hard.

"Sesshoumaru?"

Sesshoumaru blinked, found himself standing at the window of their hotel room and looking out onto the city below. He had been... listening, but not with his ears, and not to her.

It was so odd, this tickle in his brain. He had felt this before, long ago.

"Sesshoumaru, are you all right?"

Slowly, he turned.

She looked lovely, dressed for working in the dust and the mud, her hair pulled back, her wide eyes so concerned.

"I'm fine," he assured her. "I was merely thinking."

She grinned. "A million miles away again. Anyway, are you going to be okay? I'm sorry you can't come with me, but they'd be all touchy about a non-archaeologist handling such rare artifacts."

"Of course," he said, giving her a small smile. The tickle in his brain seemed to be fading, and for some reason he felt almost frightened.

She didn't appear to notice, merely kissed him and waved goodbye, marching out and into the sunshine.

For a long time Sesshoumaru stood in the empty room, wavering. Then he, too, left.

He didn't speak the language of this place, but that was all right. He didn't need directions to follow the tiny siren call that pulled him through the streets, his feet finding the pavement, then the marbled floor, and then the plush carpet that marked his path.

The inside of the casino was like every other casino - gaudy and lush, promising things that would never be delivered. It wasn't crowded at this time of the day, but there were still enough revelers tipping back cool drinks for him to move mostly unnoticed.

He found who he was looking for at the bar.

For a full minute and a half Sesshoumaru watched as his target shuffled a pack of cards and then dealt them out in classic solitaire formation on the glossy black marble bar top. The hands that dealt were showing age, though they were not yet wrinkled. He guessed they would not wrinkle for a long time still.

His prey plucked a smoldering cigar from the ashtray next to him and took a long drag.

"Well?" he finally said. "Aren't you going to sit down?"

Silently, Sesshoumaru pulled out a bar stool and sat. To the untrained eye he appeared to be perfectly at ease, lounging laconically as he signaled to the bartender to bring him a drink. The man next to him began to flip and move the cards in front of him.

There was a tense silence.

"Didn't think I'd see you ever again," the man said.

"Likewise," Sesshoumaru replied. "It was... unusual... to sense you. There aren't many of us about any more."

"Nope," the man said. "There aren't."

Sesshoumaru's drink arrived - a Long Island iced tea. Sipping thoughtfully, Sesshoumaru watched as the man next to him moved a black queen on top of a red king.

"So what brings you to Argentina, Lord of the West?" his companion asked.

"A mutual acquaintance of ours is here on business."

The fingers moving the cards faltered for the briefest of moments before regaining their swift execution of the game. "Someone else still kicking? That's surprising. I thought I knew everyone that was left."

"She is not 'left.' More... in her proper time."

Next to him, his companion grew very still.

If he listened closely, Sesshoumaru thought he could hear the din of his memories.

The man took a deep breath. "So... she's here?"

Sesshoumaru snorted softly. "If you weren't smoking that vile thing you could probably smell her on me. I'm surprised she didn't sense you."

"I keep to myself," the man said quietly. "It's easier that way."

"Yes."

"So what are you doing with her?"

Sesshoumaru had no idea how to answer that, so he merely said nothing.

"I see," his companion said after a moment, a small laugh caught in his chest. "That's... surprising."

"I'm sure."

The man resumed his game. Sesshoumaru sipped his drink and listened to the snap and clack of the cards.

"Aren't you going to ask me if I want to see her?"

"If you like. Do you want to see her?"

"No."

The cards clicked.

"Aren't you going to ask me why?"

Sesshoumaru shrugged. "Your reasons are your own. I do not know how long she will live, though."

"How old is she?"

"Thirty-one. If you change your mind, there is still time. That is all I will say on the matter."

"Okay. You..."

"...Yes?"

"You seem more magnanimous than I remember. It's weird. I keep expecting you to cut my head off."

Sesshoumaru did not respond. Instead he took another drink and looked around, taking in the decor.

"You like?" his companion asked. "I think the decorator went a little overboard myself, but I paid her enough so she probably felt obligated."

"You own this place?"

"Yup. Nice, eh?"

"Why are you not still in Japan?"

"Japan? Heh. I left that place a long time ago. I actually heard you were dead, and that was a couple of centuries ago. Where have you been?"

"Around."

"I thought you would be ruling the world. What gives?"

"...There is time enough for that, yet."

"Heh," the man said again.

Sesshoumaru watched as he moved a few cards up to the top and replaced them with the ones he had just dealt.

"A casino?" Sesshoumaru finally said, as much to break the silence as to satisfy his curiosity.

"Yup. Something wrong with that?"

"No. It is merely unexpected."

For the first time the man looked up from his game and flashed him a toothy grin, his long red ponytail slipping over his shoulder, his green eyes luminous in the dim light of the bar.

"But my dear Lord of the West, what better job is there for a trickster to do?"

Sesshoumaru laughed.

That evening, when Kagome came back from her dig, Sesshoumaru took her out.

"I've never gambled before!" she exclaimed when he seated her at a blackjack table. "I'm going to be bad at it."

"That is not necessarily true. The house doesn't always win."

"...You're not going to cheat, are you? Because you're bad at being sneaky."

"Am I?"

"Oh, forget it. Now how does this work?"

And that night, after a few too many drinks, they went back to their hotel, and Sesshoumaru allowed her to take his hand and lead him forward again.

* * *

Still, the past could be very hard, indeed.

"Do you know what today is?"

"Wednesday?"

"No. Today is the ten year anniversary of your release from the shrine!"

"It is?"

"Don't be dense. It is. And I have a present for you."

"A present?"

"Yes, a present. I'm... well, now I'm kind of nervous. Close your eyes."

"Very well."

There was a rustle as she left the room. Sesshoumaru could hear her rummaging about in the linen closet for a minute before she ran back to where he was seated in the kitchen.

"...Um, okay. You can open them again."

Sesshoumaru opened his eyes.

And stared.

Kagome shifted nervously.

"Um. You can try to touch it. I think the spell has worn off by now. I'm not even sure it still works, it's been in disuse for so long."

Sesshoumaru said nothing, merely reached out, feeling strangely hollow and nostalgic. His hand closed around it. He heard Kagome sigh with relief.

"Where did you find it?" he wondered.

"Three months ago, you remember that Chinese gentleman died and left his collection to the Beijing museum, and they called me in to identify a couple of anomalous Japanese items, and... well. There it was."

"How did you get it out of there?"

"Told them it was a fake."

Sesshoumaru tried to laugh, felt it catch in his chest.

Slowly, he slid it out of its scabbard.

"It's... Hm."

"Yeah. In even worse shape. It's... I thought, you know, since we haven't found... and since you don't have anything left from your family... and..."

She took a deep breath. "I think Inuyasha would have wanted you to have it..."

"...Perhaps."

His voice sounded very soft, even to his own ears. There seemed to be something lodged in his throat.

"...I'm sorry."

"No. Do not be sorry."

"...Aren't you going to try it out?"

For a long moment, Sesshoumaru just stared at it. Then, slowly, he slid Tessaiga back into its sheath. "No. Not right now."

She was biting her lip, and at the edge of his mind he could smell her nervousness and her sadness, the salty tang of tears that had yet to form, and he thought, Tessaiga was the blade to protect -

"Come here."

Startled, she looked up, but he was already pulling her to him, already tangling his fingers in her hair, already soothing her mouth with his own.

When he finally broke away, the scent of sorrow was no longer in the air.

He didn't know what to say or how to say it, so he merely looked down at her, letting his fingers stroke her cheek.

Then, in his arms, Kagome giggled.

"You're welcome," she said, and pulled his face to hers once more.

* * *

And the past may have been hard, but really, the present made up for it in so many ways.

"How did my suggestion of going to see a movie this afternoon end like this?"

"Like what?"

"With my panties on the lamp."

"That is quite a puzzle. We should attempt to recreate events."

"What, again?"

"Unless you have a better idea?"

"...I know! Why don't we go see a movie this afternoon?"

"...Hn."

* * *

And life was not always roses.

Sometimes, late at night, Sesshoumaru would wake to find Kagome gone from their bed. The first time it happened, he followed her scent into the kitchen, only to find her alone at the table, the harsh yellow light of the kitchen showing the tracks of her tears on her cheeks. In front of her sat a half-empty sake bottle.

She sniffled.

"Kagome?"

She didn't answer, merely drained her cup.

Uncertain, Sesshoumaru took one step into the room and halted, unsure of how to proceed.

The quiet stretched out between them until Kagome sniffled again.

"You know," she said, not looking up at him, "Kazuo said we would share a bottle of sake when I got back. After I killed the sorceress. And I didn't."

Struggling to understand, feeling helpless against her tears, he took another step forward. "You... did not go back?"

"No. It wasn't... I didn't do anything. I couldn't... I didn't..."

She trailed off. Then, slowly, she tipped the bottle over and filled her cup again before bringing it to her lips, and Sesshoumaru could hear all the pathetic words in the world fall short of her regret.

He turned and went back to bed.

Sometimes, when they were out together, Kagome would turn to Sesshoumaru to remark upon this or that thing that he might find amusing only to see him staring at the little gaggles of schoolgirls bunching together in front of shop windows, giggling to each other over some new gossipy tidbit.

The first time it happened she wondered what he was thinking, felt a tiny flash of jealousy as she moved closer to him.

"Sesshoumaru?" she said.

He didn't respond, was merely still, as though he had grown into the earth where he stood. At the edge of her mind, Kagome could hear the little cluster of schoolgirls squeaking to each other in too-loud voices.

"Keiko-chan, that weird guy is staring at you!"

"Are you serious! Eek, he is!"

"Oh my god, what a pervert! Let's get out of here. He's creepy."

Without thinking, Kagome reached up, brushed her fingers against his cheek.

And when he turned to look at her, the shadows in his eyes stretched out, wound around her, and pulled her down and down again.

For a moment she was frozen, but then, almost desperately, she stood on her tiptoes, pressed her lips to his, held him close. And when she drew back the shadows had slipped away again, back into hiding. Never gone, but no longer cast over him.

Then he was staring down at her, a little lost, a man shaken out of the darkness and into the morning light.

She groped for something to say, found it.

"I was thinking of buying a new set of curtains," she told him.

There was a pause. For a moment he blinked in confusion, the world still reeling a little too quickly -

- and then he caught up.

Sesshoumaru gave her the smallest smile, the one that was so real only she could see it.

"We don't need new curtains," he replied.

Kagome smiled back.

* * *

But though it was sometimes difficult, really, it wasn't so bad, after all.

Kagome stretched and yawned, looking gloriously mussed in the early morning sunshine.

"Do you want to go get the paper, or are you going to make me do it?" she asked.

"I had planned on making you do it."

"That's so mean! I always have to do it."

"That is certainly a matter up for debate."

"Oh please, just because you say it like that doesn't mean I'm going to believe you any more readily!"

"Say it like what?"

"All I-am-the-sole-arbiter-of-all-that-is-true! Tremble before me!"

"...I have never said anything of the sort."

"No, like that. Like it! That's the subtext. The hidden meaning."

"Well."

"...You're not even going to deny it, are you?"

"I have difficulties denying truths."

"You have difficulties not being an ass."

"So typical. You are wrong, and immediately you resort to personal attacks."

"Oh my god, you are so impossible! Get moving right now or I'm putting clothes on!"

"Not if I do this."

"What the - hey, untie me!"

"That would not be in my best interests."

"Fine. But now that you're the only one who can actually stand up, paper-duties fall to you."

"...Damn."

"Fetch!"

* * *

"What are you reading?"

"A book."

"Yes, I can see that. What book are you reading?"

"None of your business."

"This sounds kinky. I feel left out."

"It isn't."

"...Seriously, what are you reading?"

A sigh. "It is called The Body of the Lotus."

"That does sound kinky."

"I assure you it is not. The subtitle is 'Feminism and the Politics of Gender in Postwar Japan.'"

"...Okay. So... why are you reading that?"

"One of my clients told me that I do not understand women. I think that is an unfair accusation, but would feel remiss if I did not at the least give my conceptions a cursory check-up."

"...Oh."

"...You do not sound convinced. What do you mean, 'oh'?"

"I mean you don't understand men, either. But you're still one of the most highly sought-after therapists in Tokyo, though I can't imagine why."

"I admit that it sometimes puzzles me as well."

"Oh, you think you're not that good?"

"No. I think my genius often goes unnoticed. I'm amazed any of the intellectual powerhouses that walk through my door recognize my prowess at all."

"God, you're full of yourself. Isn't that some kind of psychological disorder? Narcissism, or something?"

"Only if my perception of myself is vastly out of proportion to reality."

"You make my brain hurt."

"Once again I triumph in the realm of intellectual combat."

"I need a drink."

* * *

"Do you think this dress makes me look fat?"

"No."

"...Oh."

"You sound disappointed."

"What? No! Of course not. It's just... haha, I believe you."

"And this is remarkable because...?"

"Cultural expectation. If you were human you'd say 'no' regardless of what you thought. But you... don't."

"Hn."

"Sorry. I'm happy with that answer, really."

"...You should ask me if you look fat without the dress."

"Why?"

"Take it off and you'll figure it out."

* * *

"Do you ever look back and wonder how we got here?"

"No."

"Really?"

"I am to believe you do this?"

"Sometimes. It's just... we started so far away. When I was fifteen, I fell down a well, and... I met your brother, and a monk and a kitsune and demon-slayer... and you. It's just funny, to remember where we started, and to know that we ended up here. If you told me back then that this was how it would end, I wouldn't have believed it. I wouldn't have wanted it. No offense."

"None taken. My reaction would have been similar."

"You probably would have killed me to make sure it wouldn't happen."

"Perhaps."

"You tried to a couple of times anyway."

"Yes."

"...What if you had succeeded in killing me, all the way back then?"

"There is no point in thinking on that."

"Why, because it didn't happen, or because it scares you?"

"...Because this is where we are now."

"It kind of scares me, too."

"Hn. Be quiet. There is no reason to fear."

"Sesshoumaru..."

"...Yes?"

"How did we end up here? Was it chance, or was it fate?"

"...Luck. It was luck."

* * *

And so Sesshoumaru lived with Kagome in a million little moments, and life was good, or as good as life can ever be, right up until the day Kagome turned to give him a good morning kiss and he smelled on her breath the same disease that had killed his mother.

Death leaves a heartache no one can heal; love leaves a memory no one can steal: This... has been amazing. I am so grateful to have been able to share this story with you all. Please enjoy the final chapters.

And I ran out of chapters before I ran out of people to thank, but rest assured, if you have ever left a thoughtful review, or even an 'update soon', if you have drawn a picture for HotM, or written a story inspired by it, or recommended it to someone, or commented on my LJ, or on the HotM LJ, or joined the devArt club, or, really, did anything at all, I remember you. This chapter is for you.

And also for my husband, who understood my need to see this through to the end, and supported me through it. Thank you, sweetheart. I love you.

Tales from the House of the Moon
by
Resmiranda

Chapter Thirty-Nine

"I've seen you laugh at nothing at all
I've seen you sadly weeping
The sweetest thing I ever saw
Was you asleep
And dreaming."
- The Magnetic Fields, "Asleep and Dreaming"

* * *

They called it cancer.

He had heard of it before, but had not made the connection between this clinical disease and the mysterious illness that had caused his world to crumble when he was young, so long ago. Now that he knew what it was, it was surprisingly logical that a youkai would fall ill of it - he wasn't entirely certain how it all worked, but something went wrong somewhere with cells. They weren't supposed to divide unless it was to heal or grow, except with cancer they did; multiplying over and over, turning the body against itself.

How many wounds did the body heal? How many times did it take before irreversible decay set in?

She had a month, maybe two. Pancreatic cancer, metastasized, spread through her liver and just beginning to invade her lungs. The bad cramps she had been having, the way she just wasn't interested in food, the shedding of pounds - they were all such vague symptoms. The doctors would not have known what to look for if he had not caught the scent on her breath.

But of course even then it was too late.

He wished...

* * *

"Do you remember that talk we had?"

It was evening, and she was lying listlessly in the bed they had shared. She had wanted to be at home when she left. He slept on the floor at night, next to her.

There was a rustle as he moved from his chair to her bedside. "Which one? There were many." He spoke softly, moved slowly - loud noises and sudden gestures made her nauseous. She looked back at him with tired eyes in a sunken face, surrounded by wisps of hair and the garish scarf he had bought

for her.

"The first one." Her voice was feeble. He knelt next to her.

"The one by the fire?"

A wan smile managed to manifest itself before it died. "Yes. That's the one."

He snorted. "Of course. What of it?"

She blinked slowly, a small frown on her face, her new way of shaking her head in exasperation. "If I had know that would be the first of many, I would have tried to make it better."

"It is not good enough as is?"

"No, it's fine..."

She trailed off. After a moment he thought she had fallen asleep and began to rise.

"Sesshoumaru?"

He stopped. "Yes?"

"Let's have our last conversation right now."

The request was so odd that he thought he had heard her incorrectly. "What?"

She opened her eyes and looked at him, and from behind the fog of drugs and illness the old her flashed for a brief moment. "Let's have our last conversation," she repeated.

She really had always been the only one who could make him panic. Low in his belly, a slimy knot of tension slithered around and over itself, tightening. "Are you planning on leaving afterwards?" he wondered out loud, nonchalant, but he knew she could see right through it.

"No," she said, closing her eyes again. "I just... want to have our last

conversation now. While there's still time, and I'm still me."

Her voice was breathy, a little labored. He could tell that it hurt her to speak.

But all things hurt, so it was no matter.

"All right," he said quietly.

"Come lay next to me."

The room was so quiet when he lowered himself to the mattress that he could hear the small revolt of her stomach at the movement. She grimaced, eyes still shut.

The sheets were cool and a little worn from many washings, and as he slid between them he thought of all the times he had done so over the years, of all the times she turned to him and made him into himself, of all the times he had held her, had drawn her close and made her sigh and moan. But even though he had made the most of each moment, every memory felt like a chance he had missed, though what he had failed to do he could not say. Slowly he rolled over on his side so that he was only inches away. His hand found hers where it lay listlessly against the covers. He cradled it in his own, and to him it seemed like a bird, hollow and light and -

"Kagome?" he said, voice soft, cutting off the thoughts he did not want to know.

"Mm," she mumbled. On the other side of her he heard the clicking of the morphine button as she pressed it. It seemed to have become a reflex.

He almost couldn't stand it. "Would you like me to go?"

"Mm, no." She appeared to be struggling to wake up, though she seemed quite lucid despite all the drugs in her system. With great care she turned her face to his.

For a while she just looked at him, her eyes trailing over his features, as if she were searching for something she had never seen before. He waited, wondering what to say; in his head, a thousand tiny echoes were trying to

make themselves heard, but none of them were strong enough to find voice.

"So, Kagome," he finally murmured. "How do we begin our last conversation?"

She closed her eyes and turned her face to the ceiling again before opening them slightly. Her heavy-lidded gaze might have been one of desire, once, maybe yesterday, maybe a year, a century, a millennium ago; it didn't really matter, since each one was just as unreachable as the last.

"We start with you asking me how I feel," she said after a moment of reflection.

"All right. How do you feel, Kagome?"

A tiny smile bloomed on her face. "Like shit, Sesshoumaru. Like shit."

"I see. That sounds bad," he hypothesized.

"It is bad," she agreed.

The click of the morphine was loud in the room.

She sighed. "Maybe," she said slowly, and he could tell she was trying not to slur her words too badly, "I should have planned this better."

"You never were very good at planning," he pointed out.

"No, I wasn't, was I? I made so many mistakes." She sighed again, weary. "I'm sorry."

His eyes traced the brilliant streams of color flowing through the scarf on her head. "For what are you apologizing?" he asked.

"For..." Silence fell into her words, and in the space he thought he could smell gathering tears, but then she blinked and it was gone. "For many things," she continued. "But right now... for ruining our last conversation."

Something twisted in his throat. "It is not ruined."

"I'm not saying the right things," she insisted, and this time the scent of unshed tears, of frustration and loss, was stronger.

So light, so heavy. "But what are the right things?" he wondered softly.

A small grimace crossed her face, but he could see the smile hidden in there, somewhere. "If I knew, I'd be saying them. God, I don't know. I feel like I should have something significant to say. Like I should say something wise."

"Why?" The lump in his throat squeezed tighter, into something painful that could not be swallowed or willed away. Absently, he marveled that he could still breathe around it.

Next to him, she shifted stiffly. "I guess... because I'm dying for real this time, but I still don't..." She trailed off, her eyes fluttering a little as she tried to think through the fog.

"...You don't...what?"

She turned her face to his again, seemingly startled, before giving him a tired smile. "I don't even know what I don't know. If that makes any sense. And I feel like I'm supposed to."

"Why would you know it now?"

"...I think... because this is the last thing. The very last. So I should say something that makes sense of it all, that would explain everything. It should give you comfort. It should complete me..."

Her mouth twisted sadly. "But I can't think of anything."

Briefly he closed his own eyes before opening them again. "Comfort..." he echoed in a soft, hollow voice.

"I'm sorry I'm leaving so soon," she whispered.

"It was inevitable that it would end this way." Strange how the truth rolled off his tongue as if it didn't hurt at all.

Shutting her eyes and turning away from him again, she gave the barest ghost of a laugh. "You know, I'm kind of glad that I didn't grow old with you. I'd have gone wrinkled and grey, and you'd still be beautiful. But I guess I'm ugly now, too. So maybe that's silly."

To his surprise he snorted. It was amazing, really, that she could still coax amusement from him, even now.

"It is silly," he told her. "Your appearance was never of consequence."

She glanced at him from the corner of her eye. "Any other woman," she said, "would have just been crushed. But I know what you mean."

And that was the crux of it.

The hand not holding hers moved up, brushed a thin, feeble strand of hair from her gaunt face.

"I know you do, Kagome," he said softly.

She turned to his touch, very slightly, like she always did.

"Are you afraid?" he asked suddenly.

She blinked, then closed her eyes. "No. I've done this before, remember?"

"I remember."

"I... want to wait..."

Her voice was so soft. He moved closer to her, so that his nose was just inches away from hers, his fingers stroking her cheek. "What do you mean?" he murmured.

But instead of answering him, she just frowned slightly. She seemed in danger of slipping over the edge and into sleep.

He wished he could follow. He wanted to follow her so badly.

Outside, the sun was slipping down the sky. Fiery evening light spilled in through the window, and it seemed to him in that moment that a sunset was the saddest thing of all.

"Fuyu said something to me, before I left for Edo," she said quietly, suddenly.

"...And what was that?" His thumb traced over her eyebrow.

"She asked me... what you would do without me."

"...And what did you say?"

"I didn't really answer her. I didn't know."

He said nothing.

"You don't have any close friends," she murmured. "I worry about you, after..."

But how could he take this again, and again? "I do not need them," he told her. In his throat, the lump seemed to crush his voice, leaving it as pale and sad as hers.

That weary smile again, as if she knew something he did not. "After..." she sighed. Her eyes were still closed.

"After...?"

"...you know, supposedly I should want you to move on and find someone else, so you won't be lonely. But I don't."

He could not say a word.

Very slowly, her eyes opened, just a little. "I'm just selfish, I guess."

Something in his stomach loosened.

"Good," he said.

She swallowed hard.

"But still," she murmured, fighting to stay with him, to not slip into slumber. "After..."

She tried to lift her hand, but she didn't have the strength any more.

Gently he caught her fingers in his own and brought them to his lips. "After..." he breathed against her skin. She turned her hand to stroke his cheek, and she was fragile, so terribly fragile, so breakable, and mortal, and dying -

"Sesshoumaru - "

- the world seemed so small -

" - don't be afraid."

His heart was dissipating.

"I am not afraid," he said quietly.

Again, Kagome gave him that tired smile.

"Okay," she said.

And then, without really knowing why, Sesshoumaru sank down, hid his face in the soft space between her shoulder and her throat.

"Okay," he whispered back.

Eventually, she fell asleep.

Sesshoumaru listened to her breathe.

Chapter Forty

"La lutte elle-même vers les sommets suffit à remplir un cœur d'homme. Il faut imaginer Sisyphe heureux."
- Albert Camus, "Le Mythe de Sisyphe"

* * *

Kagome died.

Sesshoumaru drifted.

He didn't move out of the apartment they had shared. Instead he came home after the urn was finally buried and threw open the windows. The incense had obliterated most of the lingering traces of her sickness, and he longed to get to the bright smell he was sure still lay somewhere underneath, but after three days of light fall breezes wafting through their home he still could not smell her. With a strange, methodical urgency Sesshoumaru unearthed closets, turned cushions, aired sheets, flipped through books, crawled into the backs of cupboards, surgically sliced open mattresses and old stuffed toys, all the while waiting for the scent of morning to be exhumed, to resurrect in him whatever it was he was searching for.

He never found it, though.

Every day Sesshoumaru woke up and went to work and wondered why he stayed in the city, or even why he stayed in the world of men at all. All that had kept him there was now gone, and there was no reason for him to continue his facade any longer, except that there was nothing to pull him from where he was, either; the age of youkai had passed, and the power he had sought in his youth seemed worse than useless. There was nothing for him in the wilderness either. So he stayed.

And every night he fell asleep and dreamed of Kagome, of her taste on his lips, of her body quivering around him, of her smile or her laugh or her sleeping face, and when he woke up again he would be happy for the briefest of

moments before he remembered that she was no longer there, and would never return, no matter how desperately he searched for her scent, how faithfully he strained to hear her footfalls. He ached to be with her. But she was gone, and there was only one way to follow her.

So he went on.

Occasionally he would think, if only Tenseiga -

- but he would never allow himself to finish. It was too painful, the thought of all the damage he might have been able to reverse, too immediate and close for comfort. And really, he had never used the sword to bring back someone who had died of illness or even of old age. It was always a wound. Perhaps that said something about him and the life he had lead, but what it might have revealed he could not say.

After a year or two, he allowed himself to remember their 'last conversation.' Of course she had lived for two more weeks, so those had not actually been the last things they had said to each other, but in some ways it was the last time he could remember knowing that Kagome was truly speaking to him from behind that awful fog of pain and drugs and disease. So in a way, it was more important than the things they had said to each other even later.

'You don't have any close friends. I worry about you, after...'

It was actually distressing to him to think that she might have truly had reason to worry about him after her death. He did not have any close friends, true, but he had not needed them when he had her, and no one could really live up to her anyway; they were always timid or deferential, always easy to predict, nothing like she had been. He didn't want to associate with any of them, because that would mean she really was over, was never coming back.

It hurt to think of her in the past tense.

But he was not lonely. He was certain of that. Sesshoumaru Did Not Get Lonely, because...

* * *

And then one day, two, maybe three years after Kagome passed away, Sesshoumaru came home from work and accidentally knocked someone aside as he passed them on the way to his apartment door.

He didn't bother to look behind him, even at the small startled cry of his victim, choosing instead to keep walking and perhaps make it to his apartment before he had to see or talk to anyone else that day. He was tired and annoyed with the universe, and in the few years that Kagome had been gone the longest conversation he'd had with anyone who was not a client consisted of curt remarks about the weather. He did not want to have to apologize or make any deferential gestures or any of that crap - he just... wanted to close the door behind him and shut the world out.

He might have made it, too - he was only ten steps away from his goal - when there was an angry shout behind him.

"Oi!"

The sound reached in through the back of his head and grabbed his brain.

Sesshoumaru slowed then stopped in his tracks, but did not turn around.

He recognized that voice. He knew it.

Over the cold, drowning flood of sudden sick aversion, he heard his challenger take a step towards him.

"Hey, asshole, get back here and apologize to my wife!"

There was a small murmur - "Kappei, no, it is fine, really" - the man's wife clearly not wanting to make a big deal of the incident, preferring instead to keep things calm, but it barely registered.

You are not named Kappei, Sesshoumaru thought. That is not the name I knew you by.

"Turn around, jackass!"

Very slowly, Sesshoumaru pivoted and looked behind him.

A very human Inuyasha stood in the middle of the hallway, his hands balled into fists, his posture threatening, as behind him the woman that had shared a body with Kagome plucked at his sleeve. She didn't look so much like Kagome now - they had never been the same person, after all - but Inuyasha... he looked the same.

Strange how he had never really known his brother and yet he should recognize him still, five hundred years after they had parted ways. Strange how his first coherent thought was that he was glad Kagome did not have to see her old friend and old love in a new life. Strange how he still felt a small, familiar flare of jealousy at the thought that she could have ever been in love with the brash, coarse man standing in the middle of the apartment hallway.

"Well?"

Sesshoumaru blinked.

Inuyasha took another step forward. "Where's her apology?" he demanded, forever the hero, forever the small man against big odds, never knowing when to back down or when to bow to those obviously superior to him.

And then the strange thought: Just like Kagome.

It was too much. With a tiny scoff, Sesshoumaru shook his head and turned back, ignoring any further attempts to regain his attention until he was safely inside his apartment and leaning against the door, hoping irrationally that he never had to set foot outside it again.

Three hours later Sesshoumaru was sitting at his kitchen table and staring listlessly at the four bottles of wine he had consumed - it was difficult for him to stay inebriated to any degree without constant ingestion and he felt he sorely needed it - when there was a forceful, demanding knock on his door. For a moment Sesshoumaru considered not getting up and answering it - not getting up ever again - but when the noise came once more he sighed and heaved himself to his feet.

When he opened it, Inuyasha stood outside, still looking angry.

Sesshoumaru raised an eyebrow and waited.

But what Inuyasha said surprised him. "Forgive me for my earlier rudeness," he snapped, not sounding sorry at all. "Suzuki Kappei. My wife wants to know if you want to come over for dinner."

It was possibly the least gracious invitation Sesshoumaru had ever received. He let the other eyebrow rise.

"You don't have to come," Inuyasha - Kappei - informed him. "I couldn't care less. She just thought you looked pale and needed a good meal."

Sesshoumaru could smell the lie. "Do not insult my intelligence," he said coldly as he began to close the door.

A hand shot out, slamming against the wood. Sesshoumaru was so surprised that he entirely forgot to reach out and break Inuyasha's arm.

"Hey! I didn't... keh! Fine, she asked around and heard your wife died. She thought you might like company, okay? But don't come if you don't like pasta. She's half Italian and was raised in Italy, so she thinks everyone needs fattening up."

Sesshoumaru stared, any number of responses coming to mind, including, 'she wasn't my wife' to 'fattening?'

Inuyasha shrugged. "She worries about people. I'd leave you to rot, but that's just me. So yes or no?"

And, quite unbidden, the echo of Kagome's words drifted across his mind.

Don't be afraid.

* * *

When Inuyasha had the appearance of six years old - though, of course, he was much, much older than six by that point - Sesshoumaru stepped down from

the mountains and into his life to give the half-breed his first lesson in combat.

Why he had decided to do so was still something of a mystery to him, though it had made perfect sense at the time. When Inuyasha reached a certain age, Sesshoumaru planned to kill him and erase the stain on his house, but even though this was decided long ago Sesshoumaru could not imagine killing the boy if his little brother was unable to defend himself. There was no honor in such an easy kill; clearly, the harder the fight the nobler the victory, and the nobler the victory the more thoroughly the stain would be lifted.

It made perfect sense.

And, of course, there was also the whole issue of the fact that Inuyasha - as a son of the Inu no Taisho - would be targeted by other youkai, and - as a half-breed - would be rejected by humans. This decreased his life expectancy considerably and Sesshoumaru had determined that this would be quite displeasing to him, and that therefore it would please him to instruct the boy. After all, he did not want him to die before the designated time. That Sesshoumaru was somewhat hazy on when that designated time would occur - or, alternatively, what exact age was that certain age when the boy became fair game - was of no consequence, as clearly the opportunity would present itself in the natural course of events.

Until then, though, Sesshoumaru preferred the boy to stay alive, and since no one else would have the privilege of killing him the boy had to be taught how to fight.

Years later, when his mind drifted back to this strange decision - and it did so with annoying frequency - Sesshoumaru suspected his logical conclusion at the time might possibly have been rather specious, and he felt a fair amount of regret that he had ever decided to do it in the first place considering Inuyasha had, eventually, actually injured him. Granted, he'd had the help of Tessaiga, but if he hadn't known how to use the sword there wouldn't have been such a problem. Waiting for his arm to regrow really had been a terrible nuisance.

Nevertheless, Sesshoumaru traveled to the south where Izayoi's family had hidden her away and demanded to teach his father's bastard child so the boy could achieve the minimum amount of competence needed to keep his worthless hide alive.

When he landed in the courtyard and demanded to see the hanyou, there was quite a stir over his sudden presence, and it really had been annoying to remind himself that killing everyone was not the best way to do things, unless he fancied having an orphaned half-breed clinging to his leg for the next hundred years or so.

Just the thought made him shudder, and he had forced himself to be content to slice the arrows out of the air until the guards actually processed his request, but by the time that happened, Inuyasha had come to him.

From around the corner of the main building two bright yellow eyes were staring at him, opened so wide in childish awe that Sesshoumaru was surprised they did not pop out of their sockets. They were muddier than his own, and just above those eyes was a shock of hair - not pure silver like their father's hair, nor silver-blue like his own, but rather simply white and flat. Worst of all, peeking out of the rough mess and twitching with each shout lobbed from guard to guard were two little triangular ears,

There was no doubt about it: the boy was a mutt.

How embarrassing.

Sesshoumaru turned and began to walk toward him.

The little boy's reaction was unbearable.

As Sesshoumaru drew closer, Inuyasha's yellow eyes - impossible not to notice that those eyes very much resembled the eyes of his father - became wider and wider, and the boy inched out from his refuge behind the bulk of the house.

He came to a stop in front of the half-breed. Inuyasha took two tentative steps toward him.

Then he opened his mouth.

"Chichiue?"

Sesshoumaru felt his blood turn to granite.

The boy's tone was painfully hopeful, the timbre painfully childish. The youkai prince felt the weight of his veins begin to drag him down -

- those eyes really were so, so familiar -

- before he came back to himself.

He kept his face impassive.

"No."

He watched the glow of those wide yellow eyes fade. Inuyasha took a step back, denied and disillusioned, uncertain as to what to do now, and Sesshoumaru could not help but stare at him. The expression on the boy's face echoed in the chasm between them, and it seemed to Sesshoumaru that perhaps Inuyasha had just felt a piece of himself harden into stone as well.

For a long moment, indifferent to the commotion around them, neither spoke.

Then, at the edge of his hearing a strange, strangled sob leapt into his head, and Sesshoumaru heard the rustle of fabric upon fabric upon fabric.

After a moment, the half-breed heard it too. Suddenly his composure broke, and he ran back around the corner of the house.

"Hahaue," Inuyasha cried, and Sesshoumaru watched as Izayoi, holding her son in front of her as though she were afraid Sesshoumaru would kill her instead of the boy, emerged from around the far wall and walked on trembling legs towards him.

When they were before him, she bowed low.

"Sesshoumaru-sama," she whispered. "Forgive him. He did not know - "

And in that moment, for the first time, Sesshoumaru felt a long, falling sadness, the sudden realization that this little boy that caused such revulsion in him, that inspired such hatred towards his once-proud family line, this little boy

had an entire life that he knew nothing about.

He must have asked about his father, must have wanted to know him, and his mother must have told him.

...your father is the most powerful demon in Japan, and he rules over the lands in the west. He is tall and regal, an inuyoukai of great power, with long silver hair and golden eyes, and he wears rich white clothes and thick armor and heavy fur...

And here he was now, gaze locked with this child that was his brother whose entire existence had changed his life, and he knew nothing of him...

* * *

"How did I become so old, Higurashi-san?" Kappei moaned into his glass of beer. "It snuck up on me."

"Long life is a blessing," Sesshoumaru answered curtly, taking a sip from his own glass of wine. "You have spent too much time abroad."

"Yes, but I'm shocked to be forty. Where did all that time go? When did I meet you?"

"When you were twenty-seven."

"You haven't aged a bit, but you already have the white hair, so I supposed that it's not hard to hide the age."

Sesshoumaru glared at his companion from the corner of his eye. Kappei was propping himself up rather tipsily against the bar, clearly struggling to keep his faculties. It was a hard thing to acknowledge, but Sesshoumaru knew he had to move soon, out of the country. He would have to get a new degree somewhere else - possibly in something else - and start over. The prospect was depressing, and to his vague horror he found that one of the most depressing aspects of it would be that he would be moving away from the Suzuki family; Etsuko was generally kind and their daughters were bright and sweet, and Kappei, at the very least, had become a good drinking acquaintance.

They were certainly not good friends, but to his surprise they were not constantly at each other's throats, either. It was hard to say it, and perhaps it was because Inuyasha reincarnated was less abrasive, or maybe it was because there wasn't a long history of neglect and abuse between them, or maybe Sesshoumaru had finally lost it, but he actually took a small amount of enjoyment in Kappei's presence.

But only a little. Really.

His only comfort, aside from actually having someone to talk to, was that Kagome would have approved of this new relationship. She had always felt sad that he had never made up with Inuyasha before he had died.

It still hurt to think of her.

Kappei interrupted his melancholy thoughts, like he always did. "Anyway, what'd you invite me out for? You never invite me out for drinks. Going out with you is like pulling teeth."

Sesshoumaru sniffed. "I invited you out to tell you something of some little consequence."

"Oh yeah? What's that?"

"That I am moving in the near future."

"What? That's not of little consequence, you damn liar!"

"I shall be leaving the country soon," Sesshoumaru repeated stoically. "I find that I need a change of venue. Perhaps start a practice elsewhere."

"What? Why? Where are you going?" If he listened hard enough, he thought he could hear a small note of panic in Kappei's voice.

"Maybe Moscow."

"Damn! Why?"

Sesshoumaru shrugged. "I know the language. It would not be difficult. But in

that vein I have something for you. A token of... thanks." He picked up the long, plain package that had been propped up next to him at the bar the whole evening and handed it to Kappei, who had been eyeing it curiously since they had sat down together.

"Oh no, I cannot take a gift from you - " Kappei began.

"Shut up and open it," Sesshoumaru said.

Kappei shut up and opened it. Sesshoumaru was not looking at him as he lifted the lid, but he heard the audible gasp of breath, and then the slow whisper of silk wrappings coming undone.

"This... this is the sword that hung over your desk in your office," breathed the man who had once been his brother.

"It is," Sesshoumaru acknowledged. He took another sip of wine.

"But... I thought you said Kagome gave this to you..." Kappei said, seemingly awed. His eyes traced over the notched and battered blade, his fingers tightening on the tattered hilt.

"She would have wanted you to have it," Sesshoumaru replied. His voice was steady and even. "She would have liked you very much."

“I am honored.”

Gently, Kappei slid Tessaiga back into its scabbard and wrapped it up again.

Then, "What was she like?"

He knew that question had been coming for a while now. Sesshoumaru shifted in his seat, feeling strange - sad and bitter and hopeful all at once. "You would have loved her," he said softly, staring at the glass of wine in his hand. He was so mesmerized by the fall of light through the glass splashing across his fingers that he almost didn't hear his companion's response.

"Keh," he heard Kappei snort at the edge of his hearing. "Not as much as you."

Slowly, Sesshoumaru blinked. "What did you say?" he asked, turning to look at the other man sitting next to him at the bar.

"Nothing," Kappei said, a little too quickly. "You never really talk about her."

Sesshoumaru felt cold for some reason, and sad. "What is there to talk about?" he wondered nonchalantly. "We were together, and then she died."

"That's not the story at all."

That’s not the way the story goes.

He stared at the bar in front of him. “Do you really want to know?”

“We’ve known each other for thirteen years. Tell me about Kagome.”

"It is a very long story."

“Tell me.”

And Sesshoumaru thought of the woman he had fought against, and fought with, of the woman who had raised him up, whom he had followed, whom he had held close in many long nights, who had patched him and repaired him with pieces of herself -

He would leave soon, may never have this chance again. He could tell Kappei - Inuyasha - everything.

It had been a very good story, after all.

Sesshoumaru leaned back, stared at the ceiling. Took a deep breath.

"Once," he said, "upon a time..."

Tales from the House of the Moon
by

Resmiranda

Fade Out:
The Miko and the King of the Moon

* * *

Once upon a time there lived a miko in the eastern lands who shone as bright as the sun. She was beautiful and kind and loved unconditionally, and yet she labored under a terrible curse, a curse that anchored her to the world and would not allow her to move on. Always behind her, the curse followed, shadowing her days and weighing her heart.

So across the land she traveled, searching for a way to seal the curse that followed behind her on poison feet. As she searched she met many people, and as her duty she faced down and killed many monsters, but always she glanced back over her shoulder, unable to defeat the beast that loomed behind her.

It so happened that one day the miko met a demon king, pale and luminous as the moon who ruled the lands in the west. However, the king had been betrayed and broken sent into exile, his lands in ruin, his family and household murdered before his eyes. When the miko happened upon him in the forest, he was bent beneath a tree with the weight of his great sorrow.

The traveling priestess could not help but see his suffering and be moved. "My lord," she said, bowing before him, "tell me what troubles you, so that I may give you what assistance I can."

The king was very cold and very proud and refused to even look at her, but she tried again.

"My lord, please allow me to be of service to you."

This time the king opened his eyes to see her there, but still he refused to speak.

For the third time, the miko bowed low. "My lord," she said, "let me be of use to you."

"Miko," the king said, "if you would help me, take away my sorrow."

Sadly, the priestess bowed her head. "My lord, if I could lift such a ghostly thing, I would not be cursed as I am. My curse follows me as does your sorrow. I, too, am searching for a way to lift it. Perhaps together we may find one."

Normally the king would not agree to such a lowly thing, but something about the priestess moved him, and he agreed, and so the king of the moon arose from his place and followed the priestess of the sun across the land. Together they befriended many demons and humans alike, fought many creatures and traversed many countries, and found many valuable things, until the day when they finally climbed the highest mountain in the north together.

At the top, the priestess looked down behind them and saw the two shadows of their curses falling against the mountainside, and she understood.

"My lord," she said, "come here and take my hand. Embrace me."

And when the king did so, the shadows of their curses mingled and shrank together until they were one, for shadows that fall behind are impossible to lift, but easy to share.

So together they stayed.

When the miko died, the king of the moon mourned her passing bitterly, and wandered the land once again bereft until he reach the lands of the west. There he stood on the shore of the sea and watched as the sun - so like the priestess he had lost - sank beneath the waves. Then he stepped into the surf, walking through the waters until they closed over his head, as he followed his beloved down to the bottom of the sea.

* * *

His personal space was about to be breached.

Tiny, sticky fingers stretched towards his well-kept hair, but Sesshoumaru found himself disinclined to move away. Not that he could have moved far,

even if he had been so inclined; the cramped seats of the airplane offered little chance of escape from his fellow passengers, and since the flight time from London to New York was longer than most flights, keeping his hair entirely free from curious, sticky children would require constant vigilance, and he was tired. They were still in the middle of take-off, so he might as well get the defilement over with.

With vague, gloomy disinterest Sesshoumaru watched from the corner of his eye as the little hand drew closer and closer...

"Matthew!"

The sound of scolding from another seat over arrested the sticky fingers in mid-trespass. They retreated.

Sesshoumaru sighed, feeling disappointed that the momentary excitement had been so thoroughly headed off at the pass and cast about for something else to engage his attention. His ears perked at the furious whispers coming from all around him - the disciplining of the child next to him, a married couple arguing over who forgot to pack what, an older man remarking to his daughter on the decline of standards in personal appearance, two men discussing the conquests planned to relieve the tedium of their business trip - but nothing held his interest for long.

Nevertheless, he still found it slightly difficult to understand English and so Sesshoumaru did his best to concentrate on the conversations in the plane even though each one bored him, even though all he wanted to do was sleep the flight away and wake up in his new life, which would hopefully turn out better than the last.

It was his second time ripping up roots and moving across the world to avoid the inevitable questions that would arise from his lack of aging. He had fallen out of touch with the Suzuki family while living in Moscow, but it was for the best, he was sure; after all, if he were human he would probably be dead by now. Nevertheless, their absence in his life left behind strange, hollow pangs that haunted him during the long winters he spent alone in Russia, though those pangs were just irritations compared to the sadness that had smothered him in solitude ever since Kagome had died.

Perhaps, he thought, another change of scenery might lighten his constant melancholy mood.

He wondered how long it would take for him to end up in Japan again.

Without warning the plane lurched as they hit a pocket of air, and Sesshoumaru found himself annoyed at the sudden bump. It was bad enough that he had to be packed in with so many humans like cattle - at the very least the ride could be as smooth as possible. Determined to ignore his discomfort he leaned back in his seat, shut his eyes and waited for sleep to come.

After a while it all started to blend together into a soothing background noise; the thrum of the engines roared dully in his ears, while around him the tide of whispers still flowed and ebbed, soft and sibilant and each as banal as the last. As he drifted between wakefulness and dreams, Sesshoumaru wished Kagome were sitting next to him.

Slowly he let his mind conjure her scent, and thought that if she were next to him, he would turn to her, and he would say, "That woman in orange is cheating on her husband with the man sitting next to her."

And Kagome might turn to him and say, "That's terrible... hey, don't listen to other people's conversations! It's rude."

"But how else will I entertain myself?" he would ask, deadpan.

"You could try talking to me, you know," she might retort, feigning offense, drawing him in playfully.

And then, before he thought twice about it: "But I talk to you all the time."

There was a quiet pause as the conversation around them swelled slightly and then fell again. He imagined Kagome giving him a sad look at this. "Not any more," she said.

Sesshoumaru sank down into the darkness of his head a little further. "...I know," he replied.

He was violently yanked out of his small fantasy when the plane lurched again,

and next to him the small child let out a small squeal of fright. Sesshoumaru kept his eyes closed, tried to imagine the child out of existence and replace him with Kagome again, but it was no use; the illusion was gone.

He inhaled deeply, trying to loosen the knot in his chest.

And then something tickled his nose. Sharp, pungent. Dangerous.

What the - ?

He'd smelled it many times before, and like always it turned his stomach, but he shouldn't be smelling it here, it didn't belong here, and he was suddenly ill.

"Kagome - " he thought, reaching out blindly for her comforting presence, but she wasn't there, and the pungent scent was strong, so strong -

- Sesshoumaru opened his eyes, his brain screaming at him to run, but there was nowhere to go, even if he escaped the metal prison of the plane, and there was no time anyway, no time at all, and something was going terribly, terribly wrong -

The gas ignited.

Sesshoumaru hung in the moment; around him, people were still laughing and talking, playing games or eating food, not knowing what he knew, unable to smell the future on the air. Each whisper was a shout, each scent beneath the scent of danger seared indelibly into his brain, and he knew he was going to remember this moment for the rest of his life, like so many other tiny moments, though this moment was not one he wanted to live in. He should do something, but even he couldn't stop the universe from rolling forwards, and the moment was so soft and ordinary that he thought, so irrationally, there could be no way that it would all change so quickly, no way it could be so thoroughly destroyed, surely it wouldn't be allowed -

- and then it's all over, no more breath, no more heartbeat, just heat, just searing, burning heat, immolation, rolling over and out, melting him to the fabric to the plastic to the metal to himself and inferno and conflagration and holocaust and pain, pain, pain, pain, pain -

* * *

And now there is memory.

...not a memory of how he came to be standing here on the shady bank of the burbling stream, for he has always been here, but a memory of before.

And then the memory of before that.

Sesshoumaru stares at nothing, all the memories flooding down, threatening to sweep him away, the memory of death, and then the memory of life, and then the memory of before, and -

He shakes his head, disbelief looming over him. He is certain there is some mistake. It must be a mistake, because -

"That," he says slowly, announcing to no one in particular, "was not how it was supposed to go at all."

"Well," Kagome replies, "it never does."

His eyes are drawn to the edge of the water where she sits in green hakama and her favorite tank top. From her boulder, she dangles her toes in the stream.

Sesshoumaru forgets how to breathe.

The stream babbles in the quiet that falls between them.

Kagome gives him a nervous little smile, and inside him something heals so rapidly that it feels exactly like breaking.

"Hi," she says softly, the quiet tremble of tears in her voice, that sweet voice that he hasn't heard in so long...

Sesshoumaru clears the bank in the blink of an eye, and then she is cradled awkwardly in his arms as she sobs with relief, as he bends his face to hers and kisses her desperately, messily, they are a tangle of limbs, a lover's knot, and in the heat of the moment they overbalance until they are molded to the rock beneath them, pressed together. His mouth is at her throat, tasting her, when he feels her voice dance over his tongue.

"Ow," Kagome declares. "That was my spine."

It takes a moment for her objection to trigger the proper response in his brain, but when it does he almost smiles before picking her up and lowering himself to sit on the damp, mossy ground, tucking her legs around his waist. "Hn," he murmurs as he nibbles on her ear, the scent of sunrise all around him, "you complain too much."

"I complain too much?" she says indignantly, if not breathlessly. "You were the one all, 'that wasn't supposed to happen!' You're like that every time." She rocks back on his lap, rubbing provocatively over him and sending his vision skating as she leans in to suck lightly on his hammering pulse.

"But it never goes the way it is supposed to..." he says through the fog of her scent, through the fog of finally having her here again, through the fog of her of her of her -

He lets the hand that is not holding her tightly brush over the place where their bodies meet. With a small cry she breaks away as he bends to her shoulder and bites lightly. "But, um - " she gasps, squirming at his touch, " - but that's the fun of it... how would we learn anything if it went the way we thought it wou-ooooh!"

Her fingers, woven into his hair, tug him away as she turns his head to trace his markings with the tip of her tongue. He swallows hard, tries to think. "But what... what is the point of choosing one's fate... if it does not turn out as expected?" he gasps beneath her assault - his markings were always particularly sensitive to her touch. His hips roll helplessly and she gives a soft moan.

"It's... what's learned... not how it's learned..." she manages to say before he

pulls her down with him, rolls over, presses her into the grass with his weight.

"I should have known," he mumbles as he nuzzles her breast, causing her to inhale sharply and press up into him, "that all that nonsense about shadows was too good to be true..."

"It's called an allegory," she groans as he moves against her. "And... um, we should really stop..."

"Why?" he wonders into her softness. "I do not want to." And he doesn't - it has been so long, and he only had a handful of moments with her to live in, and he wants to make more.

She moves restlessly under him. "Yeah, well... um... me either... but we should at least cross the bridge..." She pulls one of his hands to her lips and sucks a fingertip into her mouth. "We can... finish this on the other side..." she murmurs around it.

He makes an involuntary noise as her tongue swirls, wrapping itself around his finger. "Why... wait?" he groans as she releases him.

She looks up with soft, needy eyes and locks her gaze with his. "Because," she says throatily, still gasping for air, "it's muddy... the ground is full of sharp pebbles... and I think I have a pussy willow... lodged up my - "

"Point taken" he interrupts hastily. His brain casts about for a suitable compromise, pounces on one. "Clearly," he declares, "we must relocate to that tree over there."

"Over where?"

"Anywhere," he says. It's a pretty smooth answer if he does say so himself.

She laughs softly. "Bark hurts." Her breath curls in his ear and he shivers.

"The boulder?"

"No."

"Kagome - "

She cuts him off by pulling his face to hers and kissing him deeply, her tongue tangling with his in that old, familiar way. "You were late. Well, you're always late, but still... we should get going," she whispers against his lips as she pulls away. "We can rest on the other side."

He moves up, buries his face in her throat. "Late?" he mutters, inhaling her scent.

"Inuyasha and Kikyou were already through here," she tells him. Her voice is as gentle as the fingers she runs through his hair. "I'm sure we'll be choosing soon... If we want some time, we should go."

Reluctantly he rises and helps her to her feet. Her face rueful, Kagome brushes the moss and leaf mould from her hair and clothes. He straightens his own clothing - the indigo and white clothes of his second reign as Lord of the West, when he was growing into her - and brushes detritus from his pelt. With brisk fingers he tightens the yellow and blue obi around his waist and slants a look at her from the corner of his eye.

To his surprise she is doing the same.

He tilts his head and raises a brow in questioning.

She smiles and turns away from him, hands still moving through her hair. "Are you really so angry?" she wonders, not looking at him. "Was it really so bad?"

For a long moment he doesn't answer, merely studies the sweep of her throat, the glossy fall of her hair, the curve of her shoulders, the swell and fall of her breasts, the delicious dip and rise of her hips, and thinks of all the things he gave up and lost and sacrificed and would have died for, and when she turns to him, curious as to his silence, he sees her peering out at him. He can see her clearly in her eyes.

A soft snort escapes him as if he cannot believe that she has asked such a question. "It was not so bad, after all," he says finally.

And she smiles, reaches up, twines her warm, bare arms around his neck, and

kisses him. "Good," she says when she breaks away. "Shall we go?"

"If we must," he murmurs against her mouth before scooping her up without warning, cradling her in his arms.

A tiny sound of surprise and happiness escapes her as he strides to the foot of the bridge, but when he reaches it he pauses.

Sesshoumaru looks down at her. "Are you ready?" he asks her.

For the tiniest of moments she begins to turn her head, as though to look behind them and see the light pouring down the bank, but before she can he leans down, nuzzles her cheek.

"Do not look back," he murmurs as her breath catches.

"Okay," Kagome finally whispers.

He smiles against her face, small and soft and real. "Ready?"

He feels her smile back. "Ready."

He steps onto the bridge.

And then Sesshoumaru bends his face to hers and kisses her deeply as he steps into the sky.

~ fin ~